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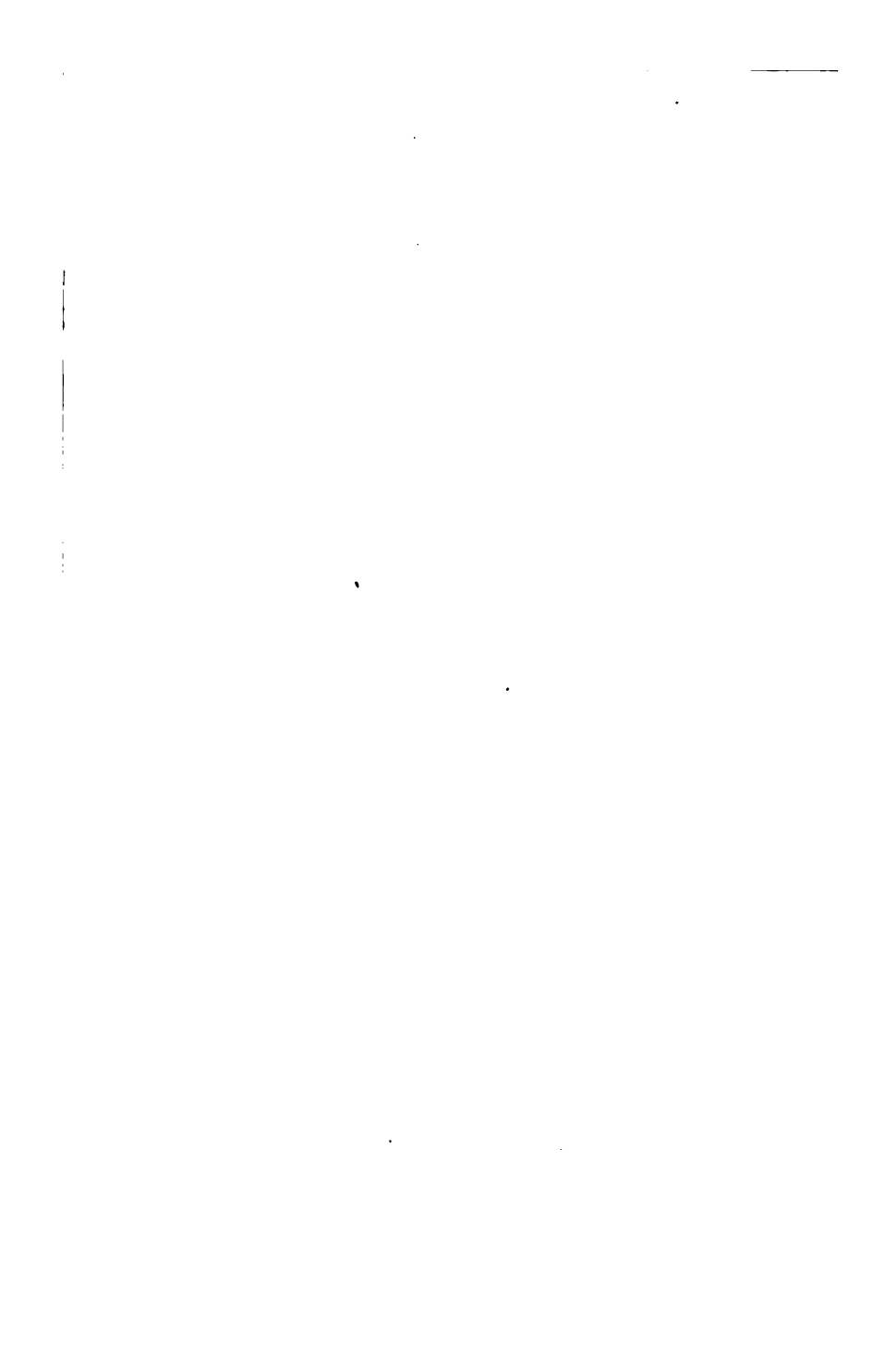
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## THE HEART OF THE DANCER



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# *The* HEART *of* *The* DANCER

By PERCY WHITE 1

Author of "Mr. Bailey-Martin," "A Passionate Pilgrim," "West End," Etc., Etc.



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# THE HEART OF THE DANCER

## CHAPTER I

WHEN the curtain went up and Althea stepped on the stage, the great house broke into a wave of applause, which, rolling from floor to ceiling, reverberated through bars and smoking-rooms. There was no doubting that full-voiced roar. The scattered audience hurried to the auditorium, and, before the prelude of the orchestra began, every point whence a view of the stage could be obtained was packed with rapt faces. Then when the lights were lowered the theatre seemed to contain but two consciousnesses, one that of the beautiful young woman in white draperies with red roses in her bright brown hair, under the liquid flutter of the lime-light, the other composed of fifteen hundred scattered rays which her powers compelled into a single vivid focus of attention. Althea was giving "The White Bird." Soon the voice rose clear and pure and virginal, thrilling and penetrating the packed

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darkness with an unerring message of perfection. Then, as the verse ended, the dance commenced; limpid and changing lights fell on the dancer as she moved through the rhythmic mazes; but soon the movements grew faster; her floating draperies might be the plummy feathers of some flying creature of the night winging its way through the twilight; now she was Syrinx hurrying from the god Pan, Arethusa rushing through the foam to escape the river-god, or whatever gracious memory the heated fancy of the beholder clutched from the charmed scene.

The second and third verses, with the linked dance, followed, and then with a low, swift curtsey Althea disappeared, the curtain descended, and the roar of delight rolled through the house. The play-bill told the audience what to expect. There could be no repetitions; Althea's performance was ended for the evening. Reticence, swiftness, and novelty of suggestion made up the charm which she wielded. "How can you expect the Tenth Muse to obey an encore?" the stern critic of the *Daily Mirror* asked at least twice a week.

When Althea's "turn" ended the audience resumed its customary attitude of half-satisfied listlessness; men lit cigars and wandered off to the promenade or prepared to watch the whirling series of pictures with which photography has learnt to travesty life with resistless ingenuity. But Ronald Dodd, the minor poet, and his friend Norman Bagshott, who

boasted that he had discovered him, sat in their stalls talking of their impressions. It was Dodd who had pictured her first as the fair night creature and then as the escaping Arethusa; but Bagshott clung to his fancy for Syrinx because, as he protested, he could hear the stump of the lustful goat feet in the lilt of the music. They sought other images still more remote to realise their impressions, whilst a squadron of cuirassiers galloped across the magic canvas and plunged, to the clang of the trumpets, into the orchestra.

"Was I wrong?" asked Bagshott. "Did I exaggerate?"

"No."

"Did you ever see anything like her?"

"Never," answered Dodd. "The fool who called her the Tenth Muse was right. She has left me with a sense of molten inefficiency."

"Molten inefficiency! What a fate for a poet," said Bagshott, smiling.

Then the friends were silent, and watched the eddying landscape which spins itself from the bowels of the tearing express, till Dodd closed his eyes.

"What accursed ingenuity," he thought—jealousy seeing a period when the camera would dethrone the bard.

Then he added aloud:

"Norman, I've had enough of this. My head spins; let's go."



And so they left the theatre and made their way into the swing and roar of Piccadilly Circus, walking westward through the still June night until the shadowy trees in the Green Park and the smell of the warm, damp earth quieted their nerves.

And then Ronald said :

" But who is she, Bagshott ? "

" Who—Althea ? "

" Yes."

" Oh, they say her father was a clergyman."

" They always are ! " replied Dodd, the shadow of disappointment in his voice.

" I believe it's true in this case, although I have no better authority than the theatrical reporter of the *Evening Herald*. Her father had a poor living somewhere in Wales, and somehow or other she developed into—what you have just seen."

" But what is her real name ? "

" Althea Westbrooke, I believe."

" Westbrooke sounds real enough," said Dodd, stopping before the imposing house where he had chambers. " Will you come in and smoke ? "

" No," said Bagshott, smiling. " I'll tramp off to Knightsbridge and leave you to garner your impressions. Good-night."

" Good-night, then," said Dodd.

They separated. Dodd rang the electric bell. A lift landed him at his door and he went to his study, sat down at his writing-table, and looked at Althea

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and her dance through the whirl of palpitating camera pictures. The grotesque and dusty reminiscences obscured the first illusions. But soon the images crowded his mind again, more clearly even and brightly than before. The cloud was lifting. He felt his pulses bumping, the blood delaying in his brain. The white-robed dancer, the red roses she wore, the clear notes of her song, the curving sweeps of her dress, struggled to express themselves in verse. Through the open window the soft night air brought balmy scents from the Park, lately soaked by a thunder shower. The poem began to take shape. When he had finished the light was creeping into the sky above the trees. Then he went to bed and tried to sleep, with his head on fire

## CHAPTER II

IT was the Sunday following Althea's twenty-fourth birthday. The public had given her a great reception: flowers had been flung on the stage, newspapers had gushed flattery, the posts had brought bracelets, rings, and trinkets; and what, strangely enough, had caught her fancy most (for she was accustomed to adulatory verse) Ronald Dodd's poem "Voltigia," in the form of a birthday card beautifully printed on satin and surrounded by choric groups of nymphs and fauns.

Althea dwelt in a handsome suite of rooms in the topmost story of a stately building overlooking the sweep of the river and most of South London. From the open window where she sat, across a faint haze of smoke and housetops innumerable, she could see the green wooded hills beyond Sydenham, and the sunshine kindling sparks on the glittering flanks of the Crystal Palace. The wide prospect pleased her. Her peaceful and airy nest was a point from whence she could reckon her successes. Somewhere across the river, in a dim Camberwell street, she had first lodged when she came to London.

Althea Westbrooke was the daughter of a poor Welsh parson, who had had a living in a district famous for musical ardour. Everyone at Llanefyr sang; Westbrooke was the ablest judge at all local musical competitions. But the valley of Llanefyr was as insanitary as picturesque. Enteric fever had killed her mother when Althea was sixteen, a second devastating epidemic claimed her father and her brother. The situation was pitiable. A beautiful young woman "of irreproachable character," to quote the bishop's appeal, "was left practically destitute." His lordship bestirred himself, a small fund was raised, and Althea sent to train for a teacher at a forbidding institution conducted on Calvinistic principles. After the freedom of her father's parsonage she found her surroundings peculiarly irksome. It was her dramatic sense in music which saved her. It chanced that she sang at a church bazaar at Llandudno, and that the manager of a travelling operatic company heard her. She was presented to the great man, who deigned to hint that, if at any time she thought of "taking the thing up seriously," he would be pleased to hear from her. And then, at the end of a long dark tunnel, Althea seemed to see a ray of comforting light. He gave her his card and introduced her to his wife, a harassed-looking lady with a permanent smile under an accumulation of pearl powder. Probably most pretty and impoverished young women at some time

in their life desire to escape from their surrounding monotony and go on the stage. Six months of the training college drove Althea to a decision. She had not reached the age of eighteen without more than one trifling and perfectly innocent love affair. The church bazaar which had introduced her to the theatrical manager also brought the inevitable young man across her path. His name was Gerald Sancroft, and he was a subaltern in a regiment of the line. His high spirits and agreeable manners were a pleasant contrast to the austerities of the training college. Sancroft had discovered that he had once met her father at Llanefyr; he distinctly recollected catching a two-pound trout in the stream which bisected the parsonage orchard. He also told her that he did not expect to get his company for another four years, and this she accepted as a hint that marriage was outside the range of his immediate ambition.

The subaltern thought her eyes and figure the most beautiful in the world, and his manner told her what he thought.

The barracks were not four miles from the college, and Sancroft's letters were the solace of Althea's depression. Their frequency, however, excited suspicion. The principal for the moment accepted the excuse that "Mr. Sancroft was a friend of Miss Westbrooke's late father," but pointed out that the correspondence must cease. It constituted a grave

breach of college discipline which could not be tolerated.

Althea gave the young soldier the hint that he must write no more. His reply, smuggled into the college, tragically demanded a last meeting, on the grounds that the regiment had been ordered to India on active service. The situation seemed delightfully romantic, if a little purposeless. Althea crept out one dark afternoon and met Sancroft behind the college in a fir wood. But training colleges for young women are full of jealous eyes, and the suspected Althea was caught returning from her tryst. She admitted that she had been saying good-bye to Mr. Sancroft, but denied that she could see any impropriety in it. The principal, however, took a different view. As Althea said in her last letter to the melancholy lieutenant, who read it on the troopship, "there was a most painful scene." Threatened with expulsion, she was reprieved to be publicly reprimanded by the school committee. But her courage was high; defiance left no room for penitence. In her emergency she wrote to her friend, the manager, reminding him of his promise. His answer came: "Come to London and I will see what I can do."

As Althea Westbrook stood, that fine July morning, at her window looking across London to the shadowy Surrey hills, she remembered this and much more. She recalled her leaving of the college in

disgrace, the indignation of her friends, the kind bishop's expostulations, and her arrival one foggy afternoon in London. Then followed an engagement to sing in the chorus of a third-rate "English Opera Company," and not a few squalid experiences which she would have forgotten if she could. But pride and the rampart of a puritan training helped her through the ordeal, if not with flying colours, at least with credit. But now the struggle was over. She had developed in six years into the glorified "song-and-dance *artiste*," who had provoked Ronald Dodd's "Voltigia." Provincial touring had brought her into contact with Mrs. Dormer, a lady of many admirable but purely practical qualities, who acted as house-keeper, secretary, and duenna, and posed for an aunt for convenience. The two women were united by the bond of many mutual services, the elder paying the younger that ungrudging homage of admiration, which only plain women outside the circumference of feminine jealousies willingly render to their sex.

Althea left the window, and approached the breakfast table, where Mrs. Dormer was placidly eating strawberries.

"Aunt Dormer!" said Althea; "the man who wrote 'Voltigia' is a poet."

"Well," replied her unmoved friend, "what of that?"

"Everything," said Althea. "Listen!"

She stepped back a few paces in the sunshine,

streaming in through the open window, and was about to read.

"I like you in that white dress," said Mrs. Dormer.

"Never mind me," said Althea. "Just listen. It's the very thing I want."

She held the poem in her left hand, glancing over the illuminated satin page at Mrs. Dormer to note the effect. As she read, her beautiful neck and shoulders swayed in magic rhythm to the lilt and meaning of the words. Althea interpreted verse with two senses instead of one. That was the secret which she had conquered. Mrs. Dormer watched her admiringly.

"Now, isn't that charming!" exclaimed Althea when she finished. "Can't you see me in that? Aren't the verses full of twilight fluttering and suggestions?"

"H'm . . . yes, dear. I suppose they are. But I'm so stupid about poetry, you know."

"I've another idea," continued Althea. "You remember that air we heard at Ostend?"

Mrs. Dormer nodded.

"This thing would fit it splendidly. Let's try."

After a brief search Mrs. Dormer found the music, sat down at the piano, and played an air, rich with buoyancy and choric suggestions.

Whilst Mrs. Dormer played Althea scanned the words, her eyes shining with pleasure.



When Mrs. Dormer had finished, she swung round on the music stool and said :

" Well? "

" I knew I was right," replied Althea. " It will 'go' splendidly. Ruffoni shall alter the time a little and make it more 'glidery,' you know. Then I'll do it for the Royal Dramatic Fund people on the twenty-first."

" But you must ask the man's permission first," said Mrs. Dormer.

" The author's? Of course. He will be delighted. They always are."

A few days later Dodd received a letter from Althea Westbrooke which made him giddy with pride.

### CHAPTER III

RONALD DODD believed that he despised popularity because he had no respect for the work of most men who were popular, an illusion not uncommon with unread poets who have never tasted the joys of respectable notoriety.

When his friend Bagshott heard of "Voltigia's" triumph he exclaimed, in a spasm of candour :

"My dear fellow, I congratulate you! What a lift!"

But as soon as he had spoken he perceived that he had said the wrong thing.

"I scarcely regard it in that light," said Dodd. "I am delighted that the poem should have appealed to so charming an artist as Miss Westbrooke; but I assure you I'm not ambitious to be advertised."

Bagshott protested.

"What! not in such company. 'Booming' never hurt anyone yet—not even a poet. Oh, envied of all ballad-makers, you will be invited to her rehearsals!"

This time Dodd smiled complacently. But when the door had closed on his friend he was compelled to admit that to be unrecognised by the profane

multitude had serious disadvantages. A poet without an audience is like a mateless grasshopper chirping in the arid loneliness of the desert. He sings all the same, but only makes the silences he breaks more profound. There were not more than six persons (including his own relations), who cared a button whether he wrote verse or not. But now that Althea had "taken him up" (he was convinced that would be the phrase used), his little ripple of reputation would widen. To have given "The Tenth Muse" a new song and dance was no small achievement for a minor poet.

Althea would raise his name from the obscurity of the title-page of an unread book of verse even to the blazing summit of "The Empyrean" poster!

On the afternoon on which Miss Westbrooke "hoped to see him," Ronald Dodd strode across the Green Park with a new sense of elation, and an imagination running riot. He had never seen that gracious fluttering being off the stage where she floated, iridescently, on the stream of the lime-light, in the words of the youthful critic of a Sunday newspaper, "the embodiment of love, of lightness, and of song." Hitherto "she had only interpreted herself to him by her art"; now she was to reveal herself at the other side of a tea-table. But underneath his pride and pleasure lurked the apprehension of a disappointment. Might not the actual woman cool the enthusiasm aroused by the artist?

He rang the bell with a faint tremor of misgiving. The room into which he was shown was of a more practical character than he expected. The Chippendale furniture was not nearly so good as his own ; he even doubted the authenticity of the spindle-legged writing-table ; the pretty blue and white china, the antique pieces of silver, the musky Eastern vases which filled the apartment of his imagination were absent, but the roses were there in unstinted plenty ; their colour and odour conquered the severity of the soft green decorations of the walls, whilst the light and air flung in from sky and river, through the tall open windows, tempered the tepid luxury of the flowers with a sense of activity and wholesomeness.

When he heard a light step approaching, his heart began to beat foolishly.

There she stood, a smile of welcome on her face, not a speck of pearl powder on her soft cheeks, a beautiful young woman without a trace of that "professional air" which he had dreaded.

She sat in a cushioned window-seat, her clear profile outlined against the movement of the summer sky, and said gracious things in a voice, calm and low-pitched, that soothed him.

It was good of him to allow her to use "Voltigia," but she feared her powers of fitly rendering its lovely movements.

But he had no fears ! She would make the pale thing live. He was sure of that. She *was* Voltigia,

silver gossamer adrift on the breeze, the fluttering rose leaf, the white wings stirring the branches, the shapes that glide under blue waters, the cloud that dances on the edge of the wind! To these and a hundred other images she would give radiant if brief existence.

She heard him with wonder. Her dancing had never impressed others so romantically before. For dancing is dancing, limelight is limelight, and a song a song.

Then to change the conversation she said she had been reading his poems; they were charming, but a little hopeless. At this she smiled, for he was outwardly a very immaculate and prosperous looking bard, groomed with care, delicately booted, and not without thought for the shape of collar and tie. A soft golden moustache shaded his lip; otherwise his face was smooth as a woman's. His eyes were of a china, blue with faint suggestions of peevishness under their limpidity. Tall and slight, yet not without depth of chest to compensate for narrow shoulders, Althea thought him "interesting," and marvelled at his flow of words, his unexpected choice of adjectives, the intensity of his gaze.

She was accustomed to admiration. Usually it was flung at her in clumsy handfuls. This youth offered it as delicate tribute by new channels of suggestion.

He noticed her smile and said :

"You think I am too prosperous for a bard—perhaps I am, but we can only live in hothouses now."

But tea came, and brought Mrs. Dormer, practical and blunt of speech. She sat bold upright in her chair and thought Dodd "rather a muff." In five minutes she admitted to herself that he was "a clever muff." The remoteness of his criticisms bewildered her. To see so much intelligence astray after diaphanous abstractions filled her with a sense of waste. Still she knew that he was the only son of Sir Francis Dodd, the head of the great city firm, and doubted not that he could afford to play the fool elegantly. So she poured out tea and listened to them, only half understanding, yet wondering at Althea's skill in ambling with this strange youth through the fields of air. It was too soon for jealousy, but she did not mistake the little sentiment underlying her impression for one of unmixed approval.

When Ronald Dodd, crowned with Althea's approval, stepped on to the Embankment, his vanity swelled in that dangerous heady manner common to untried and prosperous young men fresh from a soul-refreshing bath of flattery. His poor little gift of song, which the world regarded as a romantic weakness of youth to be outgrown, had assumed majestic proportions in the field of his immense self-approval.

## CHAPTER IV

RONALD DODD was present at all the rehearsals of "Voltigia," and was of considerable assistance.

"I think I'm nearer the heart of it," said Althea.

"You are the heart of it," said the poet.

But Althea shook her head, and ran down the steps of the Empyrean to the brougham, which had just driven up for her, with Mrs. Dormer inside.

"We have made this the greatest of Miss Westbrooke's triumphs," said the leader of the orchestra as the carriage drove off.

But for "we" Dodd read "I," and acquiesced.

Meanwhile the newspapers which busied themselves with "Althea," and misrepresented her in "interviews" printed round her portrait, announced that "Voltigia," which was destined to be her greatest triumph, had been written for her by that charming poet, Mr. Ronald Dodd, author of "White Wings in the Twilight," "the only son of Sir Francis Dodd, M.P., the famous financier and distinguished politician."

When Sir Francis read this, he exclaimed: "Good heavens! what is the boy up to now?"

and drove off at once from the House of Commons to the chambers in Piccadilly, where Ronald was sitting by a big box of cigarettes, plunged in dreams and a cloud of smoke.

Sir Francis had read "Votigia" in *The Vortex*, the latest organ of literary eccentricity, and had perceived in some dim way that "it wasn't bad." He had shown the verses to the accomplished Cleethorpe, the cultured pride of his constituents. Cleethorpe had praised them, and congratulated Sir Francis on the possession of a son who "could fly with his own wings, not Tennyson's or another's."

Now this visit was prompted by curiosity rather than apprehension. In an oblique manner the father was proud of a son unlike other men's sons. "We may perhaps make a statesman of him," hoped Sir Francis, not without misgivings. On the whole, he was less dissatisfied than he might have been. Somewhere beneath the accretions of his experience and worldly knowledge lurked a vague sense of sympathy for his son, distinct enough to prevent their quarrelling. Sir Francis Dodd had once "enjoyed the privilege" of hearing the late laureate read his own works, and the honour had filled him with respect for what he called the *belles lettres*.

His well-remembered story, commencing with the words "when I heard Lord Tennyson read 'Maud,'" had terrors for the author of "White Wings."

On the question of professional people Sir Francis



considered himself enlightened. He met actors, and even actresses, with variegated careers behind them, at the At Homes of a junior member of the Government, and treated them with tolerant condescension whilst they talked about "their art." But then, eminence is eminence, no matter in what calling, and Althea's reputed salary of a hundred guineas a week naturally coloured the views of a financier.

Unluckily, at that particular moment, Ronald was not pleased to see his father. He suspected the object of the visit, and dreaded family discussions, which, among people of refinement, he regarded as vulgar and unnecessary, chiefly on the grounds that in every intelligent family each member must know what any other member has to say. Besides, Miss Westbrooke and Mrs. Dormer were coming to tea.

Sir Francis, adopting a faintly expostulatory attitude, sat down opposite his son, and said :

"So you have been writing a 'dance-poem,' as the newspapers call it, for that girl at the Empyrean Theatre."

Ronald flung away a half-smoked cigarette a little irritably.

"Miss Westbrooke has arranged to 'give' a little thing of mine at the *fête* of the Royal Dramatic Fund," he answered, the shrewish glimmer under the soft blue of his eyes growing acuter.

"So I understand," resumed Sir Francis. "I

showed 'Voltigia' to Cleethorpe, who thinks well of it. He said the ideas in it are original."

"Did he?" replied Ronald, considerably mollified. "Cleethorpe's quite a sound critic."

"I must say I didn't quite grasp the meaning of the thing," continued his father, "but then my tastes are old-fashioned. The generation which had Wordsworth and Tennyson for guides wants something simple, virile, and direct."

"Pity they didn't always get it," observed his son disdainfully, who disliked the word "virile" as an impertinent criticism of his own literary methods. "But then Wordsworth and Tennyson had not the advantage of seeing Althea Westbrooke interpret a new art."

"A new art!" exclaimed Sir Francis. "What on earth do you mean? Singing and dancing are as old as the hills. The girl dances prettily enough, I'm told; but there's nothing new in that!"

"My dear father, she isn't a ballet girl," replied Ronald, with the air of a martyr invoking the gods for patience. His manner reminded Sir Francis that he had come to caution his son, and not to be schooled himself.

"Whatever she is," he retorted, "I hope it isn't necessary for me to tell you to be careful. The girl appears a well-conducted young person, and superior in morals and education to the ordinary run of women on the variety stage; still, the stage is the

stage, and it is unwise of a young man of your position to get too much mixed up with it."

This was too much for an irritable poet.

"My dear father!" he exclaimed, "pardon me, but you're terribly astray. Althea Westbrooke is not 'a well-conducted young person.' She is a magnificent artist. You might as well call Shelley or Catullus 'well behaved!' Have you ever seen her?"

"No. I don't go to music halls. I haven't time."

Sir Francis felt that his son was treating him as a prejudiced, middle-aged fogey, and, as he prided himself on his broad-minded views, he was piqued. Besides he had never read either Shelley or Catullus, and was not in the least enlightened by the reference.

"Of course," resumed the son, "if you have never seen Althea, you can't appreciate her. There is no one like her; there has never been anyone like her on the English stage. However, you will have an opportunity of meeting her here in five minutes. I expect her to tea with her aunt, Mrs. Dormer."

Sir Francis raised his white eyebrows, and said:

"But is not this an—eh—irregular proceeding?"

"Not in the least between artists who are collaborating, although she is a great one and I a small."

"What modesty!" observed Sir Francis ironically. "What modesty!"

But a bell rang, and they heard the drawing-room door close on ladies' murmuring voices.

"There they are," said Ronald. "When you have

seen Miss Westbrooke you will never forgive yourself for speaking of her as a well-conducted young person.'"

"Applied by a man in my position to a young woman in hers, I can see nothing ridiculous in it," said his father.

In the recesses of his very considerable self-esteem, Sir Francis stood revealed to himself as an accomplished man of the world, and in the present emergency he decided to act up to his position.

But what was he to see? The stage in his mind in private life was associated with a generous use of the rouge-pot and much untidy finery, and he followed his son into the drawing-room curiously expectant. Two ladies rose as they entered, the elder of an impassive but honest countenance, with chaperon written all over her from the black dress to the unmeaning bonnet, the other in soft-coloured silks and lace, tall and stately, with large grey eyes fuller of life than of languor, and a delicately modelled chin and mouth which dispelled suspicions.

"An unexpected pleasure," murmured Sir Francis, as his son introduced him; "indeed a most unexpected pleasure, Miss Westbrooke!"

The vulgar adventuress of his fancy, smelling of pearl-powder and the rouge-pot, had vanished.

Althea summed up Sir Francis as "rather pompous, not bad natured," whilst the servants were covering two tables, as delicately-limbed as antelopes, with

the antique silver and china in which the poet delighted.

"I once heard a Frenchman say that afternoon tea was so popular with us because the clinking of the tea-cups helped to dispel our embarrassment," said Althea, looking graciously at Sir Francis, who had been wagging his head rather foolishly. His attitude had suggested this observation, which had been invented, as well as the cynical foreign observer, for the occasion.

"He must have been an observant fellow," remarked Sir Francis, with unconscious accuracy. "Certainly it's a pleasant meal and promotes the frank exchange of ideas."

"No one in London gives such elaborate afternoon teas as your son, Sir Francis. Look! there are four kinds of sandwiches, three sorts of hot cakes, and a dazzling display of sweets."

"They are the husks of this prodigal," said Sir Francis, deciding that a playful attitude on his part best suited the occasion.

"When I tell you, Miss Westbrooke, that my father flatters himself that he has spoilt me, you may possibly understand his allusion."

"Of course you have seen that he is spoilt, Miss Westbrooke?"

"I am not sure yet," said Althea, smiling blandly.

"No. Then that's because you are in the conspiracy, and helping to spoil him yourself."

Sir Francis felt that he had given his hint neatly. It was clearly enough outlined to make his son blush with annoyance.

"What excellent cakes!" exclaimed Mrs. Dormer, coming to the rescue. "Where do you get them, Mr. Dodd?"

Whilst the poet was explaining that "his man had discovered them at a little French shop at the back of Wardour Street," Althea set about propitiating his father. She had been much interested, she said, in his speech on the "Theatres and General Amusements Bill," and regretted so useful a measure should have been shelved—was that the right term?—on the grounds that the improvement of public performances had rendered it unnecessary.

She talked to him in neat and appropriate phrases, and with a perfectly grave face. As an exhibition of common sense in unexpected quarters it was most successful.

"It is all very well for my father to talk of the 'Amusements Bill,'" interposed the poet, who, whilst pretending to converse with Mrs. Dormer, had been listening to Althea, "but I'm ashamed to tell you, Miss Westbrooke, that he has never seen you."

"I've been longing to, I assure you," said the baronet, "but one has so little leisure. The House takes up nearly every hour of the week when one is in London, and if Parliament isn't sitting, you know, one is generally at Nutfield."

"Where is Nutfield?" asked Althea.

"Our place in the country, four miles from Falconoke Station, in Southshire."

Falconoke recalled a memory, the tenderest she had ever had. She remembered addressing letters there to Gerald Sancroft. How long ago it seemed now! Since then worldly knowledge, picked up both on and off the stage, had greatly altered her views on dashing subalterns and men generally.

"I once knew some one who lived at Falconoke—a Mr. Sancroft."

Sir Francis and his son looked at her in astonishment.

"Which Sancroft?" said the elder. "Gerald—the one in the army?"

"Yes," said Althea. "He is a major now. He greatly distinguished himself in the late war. His name was continually in despatches and the newspapers."

"How odd," said Ronald. "Major Sancroft is son of Sir Rupert, our neighbour."

"Our most unneighbourly neighbour," added Sir Francis Dodd. "Eight years ago I defeated him for the Falconoke Division of Southshire, and he has never been able to forgive me."

"Your Sancroft," said Ronald, "has the reputation of being a very keen soldier."

"I had no monopoly in him," returned Althea imperturbably, perceiving with amusement the faint

ring of jealousy in the "your." "I met him at a church bazaar at Rhyl or Llandudno—I forget which—years ago. He knew my father, who was vicar of Llanefyr."

She flung in "her father the vicar" for Sir Francis Dodd's consumption, and it pleased him. He thought it accounted for her good breeding.

But the mention of the Sancrofts jarred a little on the Dodds till Mrs. Dormer came to the rescue with "Voltigia."

"You must come on Friday next to see your son's triumph, Sir Francis," said Althea.

"My little spark of reflected glory, Miss Westbrooke means," said Ronald, with proud modesty.

Certainly Sir Francis would come ; he was certain nothing could give one greater pleasure. He would come even if he had to find a member to "pair" with.

Then the ladies left, after Althea had hoped Sir Francis would not forget that she was always at home on the first and last Sunday of the month—during the season.

She gave her invitation as one accustomed to see her invitations scrambled for.

Sir Francis, from the window, watched them drive away in a neat victoria.

"The elder lady, one would presume, is an aunt on the mother's side," he observed.

Ronald "supposed so," thinking it unnecessary to



explain that Mrs. Dormer was only a highly accomplished hostage of Mrs. Grundy.

"One is glad to see she that has so efficient a chaperon," said Sir Francis.

Then he proceeded to admit he had been "very favourably impressed."

"Wait," said his son, "until you have seen her in 'Voltigia!'"

"Not a bad old gentleman," observed Mrs. Dormer as they drove away; "a little dull and pompous, but well meaning, and not so peevish as the son."

It had been Mrs. Dormer's duty to keep the poet in his place, and he had not liked it.

"But he hasn't half the son's talent," said Althea.

"But you're never peevish, my dear," returned Mrs. Dormer.

"But then I'm not a poet. I sing and dance it off. Peevishness is the badge of all the tribe."

Then she smiled to herself, remembering the inflection of his voice as he had said "your Sancroft."

## CHAPTER V

RONALD DODD stood at the back of the box behind his father, mother, and sister, hearing his name rustle across the house. When the popular breath plays approvingly for the first time around the name of a man at once vain and sensitive, he touches a point of personal elation perhaps never reached again.

The programme at that "festival of all the theatrical talents" was of great length. So many "eminent" people had offered their services that those omitted felt grievously wronged, and expressed, in whatever newspaper columns were open to their influence, regrets that protracted labours had prevented them from "assisting" in so worthy a cause.

Even stars of the second degree in the dramatic firmament managed to get an advertisement out of it. The world of music and drama had been ransacked for lions and lionesses. An ancient tragedian covered with the glories of the "sixties" "withdrew from the well-earned repose of his Surrey rose garden"—'tis the pen of the picturesque reporter which speaks—to play Horatio to the Hamlet of the latest tragic light. Actresses promoted with their

husbands to the lower ranks of the titled classes, and who proudly live up to their exalted station, "re-appeared on the scene of their former triumphs." In the Royal Box was a flutter of young princesses and the genial encouragement of a most popular Royal Highness.

"You are a part of all this," Vanity whispered in the poet's ear. The murmurs bathed his self-esteem with an exquisite sense of gratification, for nice little boys, in Eton coats and clean turn-down collars, in all parts of the crowded house, were busy selling "Voltigia," printed on stiff paper, and surrounded by the choric group of nymphs and fauns. Friendly pens had been active paragraph-making. Althea's "interpretation" could not be fully appreciated without the poem! What in another would have seemed vulgar "booming," in the case of Ronald Dodd seemed merely a healthy waft from Fame's wing. Through the gusts and eddies of talk, the proud party in that little box on the top tier heard the young man's name. To admire the airy gossamer thing he had written was evidently for the moment regarded as proof of a refined understanding.

"There is quite a run on you, Ronald," said his sister Sybil, a pretty, fair girl, with skin like alabaster, reddish brown hair, and soft blue eyes like her brother's, only calmer and more candid, because unscorched by the fires of self-consciousness.

Sybil Dodd had been as much spoilt as her brother,

but fortunately had escaped his reputation for delicacy of constitution, and so a dashing ladies' school had received her, where golf was taught by a professional, and hockey and stump cricket (played in appropriate costume) were a part of the "athletic curriculum."

The Dodds had not spoilt their children from good-natured carelessness, but according to a well-thought-out method of unstinted indulgence. Lady Dodd had a theory that children should grow up like flowers—coercion, she believed, produced that monotony of type which marks the English female average for its own, and sends so many eligible young men match-making in America.

In this treatment of the educational problem Sir Francis, the son of a Calvinistic solicitor, whose harshness had embittered his childhood, concurred. Like other victims of parental severity, Sir Francis had made up his mind that his children should not be afraid of him. He had been so successful that in the course of their not infrequent differences of opinion, his son sometimes openly regretted the imperfections of the baronet's early education. Ronald was the result of a series of most expensive private tutors, the best of whom, afterwards a distinguished man of letters, had sent him up to the university with an amount of learning, and a contempt for athletics which filled the ordinary undergraduates, whom he despised, with wonder and scorn. Private tuition in Ronald Dodd's case, however, had paid ; a "First in

Mods," and a "First in Greats," had raised him above the cheap disdain that all self-respecting "Varsity men" feel for those unblessed with the public school stamp. Ronald's success in the "Schools" had increased his disrespect for a dull world, and his admiration for himself, and excited parental hopes still unrealised.

"Voltigia" came early on the programme, between a fragment of Hamlet and a scene from a popular farce.

Whilst the house was waiting for the curtain to rise on the former, an attendant brought Ronald a pencilled note, which said: "Come behind; the author is sure of a call."

"What do they want now, Ronald?" said Lady Dodd, who, as mother of a "celebrity," was enjoying the situation.

He explained with an air of indifference, but beneath his assumed air of impenetrable calm he was painfully excited.

"Oh, Ronald! perhaps they will expect a speech," said his sister.

Sir Francis, the orator of the family, pricked up his ears.

"A speech! I hope you've prepared something."

"There will be no speech," said Ronald disdainfully.

In secret he felt that it misbecame a poet to be

elated at the chance of bowing to an applauding crowd.

"Can't you take me behind the scenes and introduce me to Miss Westbrooke, Ronald?" asked his sister, as he was leaving the box.

"Sybil, dear!" expostulated Lady Dodd, "would it be quite correct? One didn't 'know' actresses when I was a girl."

"The difficulty now is to get them to know us," answered Sybil.

"I can't take you behind," said her brother, with his hand on the door, "but I'll bring Miss Westbrooke up here and introduce her—if she'll come."

Then the bell rang; the curtain rose on Hamlet at Ophelia's feet and the grouped figures in the players' scene, and Ronald Dodd left the box for mysteries brewing behind the tragic display.

The Dodds watched the stage with the resigned respect which Shakespeare exacts from an English audience. But the scene ended; the house began to study "Voltigia" as a preparation for the coming performance, and the Dodds to plume their modest wings. Lady Dodd feared "the strain might be too much for Ronald." Sybil reassured her; after all to come on the stage and bow could hurt no one.

The lights were lowered; the curtain rose on a darkened stage, and Althea, cutting the gloom on a shaft of golden light, was welcomed by a burst of applause. Then the violins wailed and quivered

through the prelude ; the luminous draperies stirred with life, and a sweet, clear voice stirred the hush of the theatre with its message.

Pan was in the reeds piping ; a myriad little feet and wings rustled through the brakes and dells of fancy ; the changing images caught in the gossamer net of Ronald's lyric swept past the audience in a magic procession on the beautiful stream of intermingled dance and song. The sincerity and spontaneity of Althea's strange art produced effects akin to those of the loveliest movements of nature. The lime-light from the wings, enfolding the white draperies in changing floods of lambent colour, and the other accessories of the illusion, were forgotten in the wrought charm of the result. When the end was reached, the audience, drawn into the magic circle, desiring a renewal of the dissolving spell, found relief in repeated bursts of applause whilst Althea, curtseying low, slowly withdrew.

But as the force of the illusion receded, the extraordinary dexterity of the means creating it became more fully realised. It was a triumph to be accepted with enthusiasm outside the balance of criticism. The clamour filled the house like an exhilarating gas ; the volume of applause, accompanied by cries of " Author ! " " Author ! " redoubled, and finally the curtain moved aside and Althea led Ronald Dodd before the house to face the storm of noisy honour. She, with radiant face, curtseyed low ; but he

stood, with blue eyes fixed, dazed and bewildered before the roaring sea of faces. But suddenly she whispered to him, and then he bowed automatically, infusing by his awkwardness a faint element of absurdity into eddies of enthusiastic approval sweeping round the house.

In the little box, Lady Dodd furtively wiped tears of delight from her eyes, and when Althea in her walking dress, with the delight of success dancing in her eyes, entered the box with Ronald, the whole family fell at her feet. Never had they seen anything so beautiful, so exquisite, so unspeakably lovely, so adjectiveless!

But Althea laughed and said that the first honours belonged to Mr. Ronald Dodd. His was the poetic tree; she was only the little bird singing on the bough.

And the proud poet believed it.



## CHAPTER VI

SIR RUPERT SANCROFT was sixty years old; his hair white and still thick; his figure erect. Under his aquiline nose his snowy moustache raised defiant ends in soldierly fashion. He was standing on a knoll amid a patch of fern and bracken, under a vigorous oak, whose leaves September had tipped with colour, and there was a frown on his face. Wherever his harassed eyes fell he found cause for discontent. The rough vegetation of the park had invaded the garden; gates and palings, barns and outhouses, needed paint and repairs. The red-brick Tudor-turrets of the Hall, loosed by frost, rain, and wind, vainly called for the mason. From park, from home-farm, from garden, from Hall, came silent appeals which Sir Rupert could not obey. He stood in the genial sun absorbed in unpleasant reflections till the mortgages on his fair domain assumed the fantastic shape of beasts of prey, steadily devastating Falconoke. He had fed them with his beloved trees, had appeased them with his father's collection of armour, but the monsters at his park gates still opened predatory jaws for fresh sacrifices.

From the rising ground where he stood, but some

four miles off, he could see a great white, square-walled mansion lording it over the landscape. The sun flashing on acres of glass signalled that expense was no object. Above the roof waved a Union Jack, telling the countryside that Sir Francis Dodd was at home.

No banner waved over Falconoke when Sir Rupert Sancroft was at home; but the other baronet of yesterday argued that the hoisting of his saved his friends trouble. With a strong glass half the county could see whether the great man was within its confines.

"Confound him and his flag," thought Sir Rupert bitterly.

Twenty years before Nutfield had been a dependency of Falconoke; and there, where the great mansion now shone opulently in the September sun, an ancient but insanitary grange had stood. But Sir Rupert had been compelled to sell it, and the rich merchant—then little known beyond the City—bought it. This period Sir Rupert referred to as the "Dodd Invasion." Ten years later the newcomer, riding on the Radical wave, which swept over rural constituencies, defeated Sir Rupert at the polls. The contest, a very bitter one, had left many angry memories behind it. That a Dodd—a man who traded in tallows, oils, molasses, and Sir Rupert knew not what manner of produce—should defeat a Sancroft on his own ground, seemed sacrilege. Poor

Lady Sancroft, then alive, had wept tears of rage at her husband's humiliation, whilst Sir Rupert never forgave the district for its "black ingratitude," and so the advances of the Dodds, who, "although differing in politics, desired to be friendly," were promptly snubbed.

In Parliament Dodd's wealth, weight, and push brought him into prominence with his party, and after six years' service he was rewarded with a baronetcy. And thus, in twenty years, thanks to the democratic conditions surrounding their rivalry, the weight of Sir Francis more than balanced that of Sir Rupert.

The devastating achievements of hate are no less important than the victories of love, although, thanks to the efforts of an amiable and well-meaning hypocrisy, less freely displayed. Sir Rupert believed that the very bitter sentiment he entertained towards Sir Francis Dodd was political, not personal. The rise of such men as Dodd, he argued, was evidence of the dangerous changes in English society.

The Sancrofts had lived at Falconoke since Agincourt. The house, rebuilt on the site of a still more ancient manor by Thomas Sancroft, a friend of Wolsey, was a noble Tudor structure to which succeeding Sancrofts had added. It seemed to have grown in mellow beauty much as the great oaks in the park. The turrets, gables, and the ivy-clad tower, the great oriel windows of the banqueting

hall, the old oak, the pictures, the Elizabethan relics, were an epic in honour of an ancient but decaying family. For two generations the Sancrofts, instead of adjusting themselves to changing conditions, had wasted their substance and energy in a vain conflict to bend circumstances to their own sense of moral and political order, and now the family was paying for its pride. The whole county knew this and was sorry, but with that air of exasperating intellectual superiority which is so very near contempt. "Sir Rupert was a grand old Tory but"—such objections are always complimentary to the critic's greater liberality of mind. Of course, no one imagined that as a family the Dodds seriously compared with the Sancrofts. Everyone knew that Sir Percival Sancroft, whose portrait (attributed to Vandyke) hung in the great banqueting hall, was one of the first of the knights-baronet created by Charles I. But although the family history gave much colour and picturesqueness to local records, the past is the past and the present is the present, and it was visible to the naked eye of the neighbourhood that the old family was sinking and the new one rising, and so, if there were regrets for the one, there was increasing honour due to the other. For to a family deeply rooted in the soil like the Sancrofts, homage is rendered as by a law of Nature, but brings no reward to those offering it, whereas the flattery, judiciously lavished on a new man of great wealth, not unfre-

quently is followed by its own reward. If, therefore, the county was careful not to slight the Sancrofts, it took the greatest pains to propitiate the Dodds.

Sir Rupert stood with his eyes fixed on his rival's flag, resenting its intrusion on the landscape with ten-fold vigour because he knew that the man in whose honour it flapped in the soft west wind, wielded the financial engines to which the owner of Falconoke Hall paid, with increasing difficulty, the quarterly tribute.

Still in his mental prospect there was one very bright spot. A ray of light relieved the despondency of Sir Rupert's reflections when he thought of his son, "the youngest lieutenant-colonel in the British Army," one of its most promising soldiers, and the hero of a brilliant campaign. With a handful of troops, white and black, he had defended an almost untenable hill fort against a fanatical army of Pathans, whilst the whole empire looked on with breathless admiration, and thrilled with joy and pride when the relieving force raised the furious siege. "A noble feat of arms heroically carried out," said the commander-in-chief, when he shook the young soldier's hands. The words blazed proudly in the English newspapers, and made a splendid contrast to Sir Rupert's mortgages, who was holding on at Falconoke as resolutely as his son had clung to the shot-riddled, bloodstained walls beyond the North-Western Indian border. But the gallant son was

now on his way home, covered with glory and with the prospect of an appointment on the staff of an outgoing Viceroy.

Great is the comfort of comparisons at the expense of our enemies! Sir Rupert did not forget that the rival who had won his seat, and, as a practical business man, with a hundred local interests to be served, bought up the mortgages on Falconoke, had also a son—a minor poet, who had mixed himself up with the stage. Whenever the neighbourhood made comparisons, it admitted to itself that the only way in which Sir Rupert beat Sir Francis was in sons, for a poet is naturally without consideration in a sporting country, whilst a distinguished soldier can be sure of quite as much honour as is good for him.

Sir Rupert crossed a field where a flock of sheep, the property of a local butcher, were grazing, and took a path leading to the house; his eye fell fondly on the beautiful old place as it basked in the kindly September sun. He noted the jackdaws wheeling around the turrets, jet black against the blue sky, which smiled limpidly between the dark cedar tree and the mellow redness of the ivied walls.

In the hall the old butler met him with a telegram, which had been expected all the morning.

"Shall be at Falconoke on Saturday the 19th," was all it said.

"Colonel Sancroft will be home on the 19th, Soames," said Sir Rupert.

"We shall all be proud to see him, sir!" said the old butler, with glistening eyes.

A few days later the county paper announced to its readers that the home-coming of so famous a soldier—a member of a distinguished county family—was an incident which Falconoke, Wraxted, Closeham, and Farcombe could not afford to overlook. Sir Rupert was congratulated as the father of so noble a son. The eyes of the lonely old man filled with tears of pride when he read the paragraph; and Althea Westbrooke, on a visit to Nutfield, read it too.

## CHAPTER VII

**WHEN** Falconoke decided to give Colonel Sancroft a public reception, it was not quite certain how to set to work. Such an event was almost without record in its annals. In their emergency, however, after a prolonged debate, the Town Council finally consulted Sir Francis Dodd, who drew up, as he modestly said, a simple programme for their guidance.

The day on which Colonel Sancroft arrived was cloudless and beautiful. September wore his crown of serene blue and gold ; the little borough, with its roots deep in the past, blinked cheerfully, yet with an air of mild self-importance, in the light of a dazzling sky.

Bashful country towns, where the decorative sense is in abeyance, and where the ordinary symbols of popular celebration, fireworks excepted, seemed absurd, rejoice with difficulty. Still Falconoke did its best. Streamers and bunting met you in unexpected places ; the avenue of elms in the broad main street, flanked by wide-gabled, red-roofed houses, blossomed out into a fine crop of pale pink paper roses ; the Town Hall and railway station were decorated with evergreens, and opposite the Sancroft Arms a trium-



phal arch straddled across the road, crowned with the legend, "Welcome to the Hero."

At one end of the High Street stands the noble Norman church, on that proud morning flying the Union Jack; at the other, the railway station, the centre of excitement, where the people of Falconoke and the local magnates had assembled to honour the successful soldier.

There were rumours of martial music and the flash of local steel in the still hot air; the picked company of the Southshire Volunteers was drawn up before the station, and behind the guard of honour a burly broad-shouldered country crowd was patiently perspiring in the sun. On the platform were grouped the municipal authorities, ready with an address; among them Sir Francis Dodd, in uniform as honorary colonel of the "Southshires," was a prominent figure. In the midst of a group of officers in mufti from the Olchester Barracks stood Sir Rupert Sancroft, pale with pride and excitement.

The carriages of the county families had been honoured with a place outside the low palings of the railway station, and from her seat in the Dodds' landau Althea Westbrooke's quick eye missed little of the stir and bustle on the platform. She had seen the meeting of the baronets, and watched the ominous stiffening of Sir Rupert's back.

The happy sense of worldly superiority soothes human rancour in dealing with the less lucky, and

Sir Francis tried hard to overlook the proud resentment of his neighbour, which he had schooled himself to regard as involuntary homage paid to his own victory. His mistake was to expect equal magnanimity in a vanquished political opponent. Moreover, the whole country declared Sir Rupert's implacable attitude "meant nothing."

The moment seemed to Sir Francis suited for gracious condescension on his part.

"Like the rest of the world, Sir Rupert," said he, "I have read of your son's splendid feat with admiration. The whole country is proud of him, and I offer you my most respectful congratulations."

"I have the honour to thank you," replied Sir Rupert, frigidly inclining his head.

In the chilly silence which followed, the young swallows resting on the telegraph wires could be heard twittering petulantly. Fortunately the excellent opinion which Sir Francis entertained of himself would not allow him to admit that anyone would purposely snub him, and so he attributed Sir Rupert's ungenial speech to manner rather than animosity.

But the tramp of a squad of the "First South-shires" through the waiting-room to the platform to make a better military display dispelled the little cloud.

"I am afraid we shall never thaw Sir Rupert," said Sybil Dodd, who had also interpreted the scene with feminine intelligence.

"We have tried our best," said her mother; "more we cannot do. Sir Rupert cannot forgive us for winning the seat."

But the question was one which Ronald Dodd preferred not to discuss, although the picturesqueness of the Sancroft family appealed strongly to him. He glanced back to the old-fashioned barouche, where Miss Sancroft sat bolt upright with impassive face, and thought she would make a good subject for a poem. In the Sancroft family all the men were stalwart and handsome, but the women approximated too closely to the male type for beauty. Miss Sancroft was five feet ten; her mouth inflexible, her nose narrow and aquiline. She was thirty-five, and ought to have been bored to death alone with her father at the Hall; whether she was or not no one knew. She had bowed coldly to the Dodds, and Althea had suspected that the temperature of the salute was lowered because she was of the party. This slightly annoyed her, for she had already won over half the country since she had been at Nutfield.

At this point the band began to play a selection from *Carmen* with the ragged execution too often associated with the music of the auxiliary forces, and before the Toreador's song had reached its climax the captain, with an eye on the down signal, shouted "Shoulder ar-rums!" and a moment later the train was seen rounding the curve. The Toreador stopped

short, a buzz of expectancy stirred the crowd, and a loud rustic voice shouted "Here she coom!"

As the train steamed into the station the official group surged towards the carriage, from which a handsome, tanned, moustached face was seen eagerly looking. Then the gentleman in the purple robe and chain of office bustled and fidgeted, whilst the Sancrofts publicly shook hands. That moment atoned to Sir Rupert for many years of discouragement and disappointment. It seemed that this bronzed soldier son had placed a strong shoulder under the failing fortunes of the family, and raised them to a braver level.

"How handsome he is," said Sybil.

"Handsome than ever," thought Althea.

Then, as had been arranged, Sir Francis, in the double capacity of colonel of the "Southshires" and member for the division, made a brief speech of welcome, inaudible in the hurrahs of the crowd. The "youngest colonel in the British army" bowed, smiled, and shook hands, and then standing at attention, respectfully listened to the address of His Worship the Mayor.

Sir Rupert, a few feet behind, glanced round the crowd, as much as to say, "This is my son, gentlemen, my own son! What do you think of him?"

The address over, the cheering began, those who saw least shouting most. At a signal from a mounted constable the ancient barouche with the Sancroft

arms drove up through the lines of shouldered bayonets, and the hero, followed by his father, and welcomed by his sister, stepped in, and sat with his back to the horses. Whatever emotions their meeting may have provoked were carefully concealed; but Althea Westbrooke, watching in deep interest, saw the austere lines on Miss Sancroft's face vanish like mist in a cheerful breeze. Here, somewhat jostled by the crowd, the band struck up "See the Conquering Hero Comes," the guard of honour, who had practised the exercise every Saturday and Wednesday for three preceding weeks, saluted with remarkable precision, and the Sancrofts drove away under the triumphal arch through a cheering crowd.

"How thoroughly Colonel Sancroft enjoyed himself," said Althea.

"I'm glad he didn't try to look as though a public ovation was all in a day's march," said Ronald.

His remark was received in silence, and so he added, to test its favour, that he "hoped the thing wouldn't be overdone."

"It is only with artists that there is any danger of that," said Althea.

"Just think what Colonel Sancroft must feel after all he has gone through," said Sybil. "The awful days, the more awful nights without sleep, and then the heat, the wounds, the bloodshed. Oh, Ronald! what a subject for a poet!"

"A poet laureate," answered her brother, whose stock of altruistic enthusiasm was low.

Sir Francis, with his best military stride, his spurs ringing like a dashing dragoon's, approached his carriage.

"A very fine fellow, indeed," he remarked, "and modest too. Said he didn't deserve anything of the kind, and complimented me on the appearance of the men. It has been a grand day for Sir Rupert, and ought to unfreeze him. We are going to march off to the cricket field now, there is to be an inspection. See you at dinner, Miss Westbrooke."

Sir Francis touched his helmet in soldierly fashion, strode back to his company, now being formed in fours, and mounting an exceedingly quiet charger, rode at the head of his men down the main street under the evergreens and the drooping flags, proud of his share in the triumphs of the day, whilst the band played "When Johnny Comes Marching Home."

But the party in the landau, sitting behind that perfectly matched pair, the immaculate coachman, the footman the envy of all the carriage owners in the district, drove back through the leafy lanes and the brightening hedgerows to Nutfield in a far more thoughtful mood than they had set out.

"I think," said Lady Dodd, accounting for the pensive shadow, "that we all want tea."

## CHAPTER VIII

THE arrival of Colonel Sancroft at Falconoke touched a group of feelings in Althea Westbrooke which she had forgotten in the first delights of success. Her intellect and her emotions alike had been absorbed in acquiring and developing an art of which the more daring critics pretended she was the discoverer. Just as a stronger light or a deeper shadow affects the aspect of the external world, so may a woman's mind be changed by an apparently insignificant alteration in the stream of circumstance. It seemed to Althea that when Gerald Sancroft stepped from his luminous background of romance and heroic action to the platform, that he moved at the same time into the secret place left vacant in her imagination by his departure to India. "If," thought she, "we meet again, it will be on no unequal ground. If he has won his laurels, I have not quite missed mine." Had he, she wondered, followed her career (as she had followed his) as the newspapers reflected it, or had she dwindled to an unimportant fact in his memory, and would he—and this seemed of great moment—know her if they met again? "For I am much prettier than I used to be," she thought.

The night after his arrival she lay long awake, surveying everything that had passed between them. There was not very much to remember. One August day, when the whole Snowdon range outlined itself against blue distance, they had walked half-way up a mountain together and picked bilberries. By an odd process of the recollection, that half-forgotten day now shone brightly among recorded impressions. If his conduct towards her, when he was a subaltern and she a schoolgirl, had fallen short of any high level of generous sentiment, that was long ago ; moreover, in the world most familiar to her experience, the world which stirs round the stage-door, men and women meet on the understanding of equal risks, and if he had made love to her without visible excuse, the dilemma in which he had involved her and the sentiments which he had aroused had given her the courage and energy to leap from the training college to the stage. Viewed in this light it even seemed that Althea Westbrooke owed her position to Gerald Sancroft's intervention. Yet she thought it strange these besieging fancies would not let her sleep. Why was it? Perhaps because she loved experiments. Her acquaintance with Ronald Dodd, her presence at Nutfield as a guest, had grown out of one; to meet Gerald Sancroft again and see what would happen, would at least be an experiment equally attractive. But what could happen? When she thought of the "weakness" of some women in her profession in



their dealings with quite second-rate men—things like that manager who had first helped her when she came to London—her sex appeared a little contemptible. But then—the problem was full of “but thens” all in her favour—she was very different to the unfortunate examples who had “muddled away” their lives; she had no intention of making sacrifices for any one.

Of course the question of marriage presented itself; it loomed rather as an extreme risk than a golden prospect. A young woman, who, for two years, has been earning £100 a week for ten months in the year, regards matrimony with a far more critical eye than the girl floated with forethought on the stream of society with no other goal for her ambition.

Althea fell asleep at last, with Colonel Sancroft's splendid bronzed face smiling on her out of the carriage window, and when she awoke was conscious of an indefinable change.

The change was made clearer still at breakfast. Lady Dodd, glancing across the table, said:

“My dear Miss Westbrooke, I'm afraid the sun was too much for you yesterday.”

“Not the sun, Lady Dodd,” Althea replied; “I haven't earned my sleep.”

Ronald, wondering at faint violet rings round her fine eyes, compared her in his mind to Sappho.

“I should think your brain was too full of things

to sleep," said Norman Bagshott, who had joined the party the evening before.

"It wouldn't be full of them long if I didn't," replied Althea, with a sweet smile to blunt the retort.

"Sir Francis can never sleep after speaking in the House," observed Lady Dodd. "It is a great pity, for he's really fond of it. Fortunately he doesn't require nearly so much sleep as I do."

"Men's brains are not so active as ours, that's why," said Sybil Dodd.

Ronald supposed languidly that they all slept as well as they deserved.

"Not poets surely?" suggested Althea.

But Norman Bagshott thought that even bards, on the "high and giddy mast" of composition, dozed occasionally, and Lady Dodd wondered what sort of night Colonel Sancroft had spent after his exciting day. It seemed a pity, she thought, that Sir Rupert had not invited a nice house-party of old friends to welcome his son.

"Talking of sleeping," said Bagshott, "I saw in an evening paper that Colonel Sancroft is to sleep and dine at Windsor."

"They all do," said Ronald.

"Who all do?" asked his sister.

"Soldiers with names in the papers," he answered.

"That young man is getting peevish," thought Althea, who never corrected anybody. She was sorry for she rather liked him.

"I should like to have heard what Sir Rupert said to his son at dinner last night said Sybil."

"I can picture the scene perfectly," said Ronald, his blue eyes narrowing with malice. "Curtain rises on family at dinner; Colonel Sancroft on right of father, daughter on left. She wears black silk, with V-shaped open bodice. In the middle of table is a silver bowl with a dozen late roses cut too short in the stalk. Miss Sancroft thinks it, botanically speaking, a crime to cut them long. Dinner business proceeds. There are three courses (including brace of partridges), followed by plum tart with cream, and a savoury—sardines on toast, I suspect. Dinner over, Sir Rupert asks butler whether there is any '47 port in the cellar. 'There were three bottles left after Master Gerald's—I beg pardon—the Colonel's coming of age,' answers the butler. 'We drank one then.' Exit butler. 'Ah, I remember that wine, sir,' says the Colonel. 'Drank two glasses; haven't tasted anything like it since.' There is an interval, which Miss Sancroft fills in with a sigh. Enter butler with wine carefully decanted. If there were an orchestra, here is a good opportunity for appropriate music. Sir Rupert proceeds to fill his daughter's glass to within half-inch of top; fills his own and son's glass more generously, then, raising glass, says, 'My children, let us drink to the fortunes of our house.' They do so in silence. Colonel glances across table and wonders why the deuce his sister looks so old,

and why she has never married. Miss Sancroft retires; Sir Rupert opens door with old-fashioned courtesy, and, having carefully closed it, resumes his seat. 'You saw the flag waving on our enemy's turret?' says Sir Rupert. 'I did,' replies the Colonel. 'Let us drink confusion to the house where it waves,' says Sir Rupert. They proceed to do so. Curtain descends as deputation of tenantry appears on scene to say that all their roofs have fallen in."

Ronald's spiteful sketch held the attention of the breakfast table. He delivered it with point and appropriate gesture, but Norman Bagshott was the only one who laughed.

"I don't think you would laugh, Mr. Bagshott, if you had seen the meeting between Sir Rupert and his son yesterday," said Sybil reproachfully. "It was really touching. I wish that my father had won any other seat in the county than the Sancrofts'."

"I'm sorry you can't see the merits of this powerful drama as it might be represented at the Adelphi," said Ronald; "but perhaps you would prefer it done in Tennysonian blank verse, in the style of 'Aylmer's Field,' under the title of 'The Colonel's Return.' It is one of those sugary, truly English subjects in which the late laureate delighted."

"My dear Ronald, you really are too satirical," said his mother. "After all, the Sancrofts are our neighbours, and a most distinguished family, and,

whether they like us or not, we cannot help respecting them."

At this point Sir Francis, who had been busy in his study; and who breakfasted alone, entered with three opulent roses, which he presented to Miss Westbrooke. Soon after the breakfast party broke up. Sybil Dodd had arranged to drive Althea into Falconoke in a Ralli-cart, the envy of the most fastidious sportswomen of the district. Ronald and Norman Bagshott saw them start. It was a bright, fresh morning; the sun shone cheerfully on the speckless harness and the glossy coat of the pretty mare, nozzling the flattering hand of the groom.

"Whether your pony was created for the cart, or the cart for the pony, Miss Dodd, the fact that they have come together is more like a miracle producing perfection than the brutal workings of chance."

Bagshott seemed more pleased with the pedantic neatness of his phrase than his friend.

"Oh, Norman, Norman, to think that such critical powers should be wasted on horse-flesh," said Ronald, emitting superciliously two parallel lines of cigarette smoke from his nostrils.

"Thank you three times, Mr. Bagshott," answered Sybil, gathering up the brown leather reins, "once for 'Pet,' once for the cart, and once for myself."

Then "Pet" tossed a pretty head and flashed sparks from her bit into the shadow of the laurel, the

groom jumped up behind, and the cart swung off merrily down the drive under the beech boughs.

"I believe Mr. Bagshott prepares speeches in leisure moments to let off on appropriate occasions," said Sybil, coaxing the mare's hurried stride into a neatly cadenced trot.

"If he doesn't repeat them when the opportunity recurs, the plan has advantages," Althea replied.

A friendship had sprung up between them, as it often will between women who have drawn their experiences from opposite poles. Althea found Sybil very reposeful after the emotional people she was accustomed to meet; Sybil regarded Althea with the admiration which one young woman feels for another who has sailed perilous seas alone, and planted a pioneer's flag on a rich island of her own discovery.

There were two roads to Falconoke—one across the park, the other through Wraxted. Miss Dodd desired her guest to choose. The Dodds' coachman had strict orders from Sir Francis not to invade Sir Rupert's domain, in spite of the right-of-way, and hitherto Althea's drives had been in other directions.

"The park, if you don't mind. I've never seen it," said Althea.

Under the shadow of the Colonel's young reputation it had become a more interesting domain than ever. Of this both were conscious, although neither admitted it.

"Then we'll enter the gates of the enemy," said

Sybil. "It's much the prettier drive. What fun if we met Colonel Sancroft! Do you think he would remember you again, Miss Westbrooke?"

"Hardly," said Althea. "I was a schoolgirl when I met him—a century ago, before I even thought of the stage."

The reply was as accurate as replies to questions inconvenient to answer generally are.

Then they drove in at the handsome iron gates that wanted painting, by the keeper's cottage that needed re-thatching; past noble clumps of oaks which the Falconoke people said "would have to come down," and sturdy battalions of thorn bushes, in springtime masses of white and pink blossoms, now dusky red with crops of berries, whilst Sybil talked artlessly of the fortunes of the Sancrofts, and the fresh air blew in their faces with autumn's message.

"We might be the Capulets and Montagues of the district if the Dodds were not so meek and forgiving," she said.

"Colonel Sancroft is perhaps a little massive for Romeo, but you would make a charming Juliet," said Althea, laughing.

Sybil blushed faintly, gave a moment's attention to her mare swinging along in the fulness of her pride, and resumed:

"Romeo's my part. I played it at our school theatricals, because I was the tallest, in 'doublet and hose,' and a beautiful little cap with a straight cock's

feather. So smart! Only the mammas and sisters were admitted, and we danced with one another afterwards. I feel quite a 'professional' when I think of it."

They were now ascending a wooded ridge through thick coverts; the road, tessellated with quivering chequers, danced round the mare's slender feet as she breasted the hill; the sweet melancholy of the autumn reached them in deeper respirations from mossy hollows where the dry leaves were collecting. The quiet woods were full of the robin's plaintive song; in the sunshine was the flutter of the later butterflies.

"How he must enjoy this after India!" said Miss Dodd thoughtfully.

But as she spoke a loud detonation, followed by an alarming crash, broke the profound peace of the morning, and for a moment or two the startled pony, out of hand, danced across the road, with erect ears and nostrils distended.

"Steady, Pet, steady!" said Sybil soothingly. "Pet hates sudden noises. What is it, Morris?"

"Blasting something, I think, miss," answered the young groom.

As they reached the brow Pet settled into a quicker stride again, although the twitching ears still showed the tension of her nerves. Below, gathered round a big elm, fallen half across the road, which it completely blocked with its shattered boughs, stood a



group of men, ditchers and hedgers, in ancient gaiters, amid them a very tall gentleman in a grey suit.

"I think," said Sybil a little nervously, "that it must be Colonel Sancroft. Shall we turn back?"

"Certainly not," said Althea resolutely. "He has seen us, and will think we're afraid."

And so Sybil pulled up the still restive mare within a few feet of the leafy barrier, whilst Sancroft, carelessly turning at the sound of approaching wheels, watched them inquiringly. But when he recognised Althea Westbrooke in her grey felt hat and tailor-made dress, his sunburnt face reddened to his eyebrows.

But the old woodman at his side muttered, "Miss Dodd from Nutfield, Master Gerald," and the Colonel recovered from his surprise, and, approaching the cart with hat raised, said :

"It isn't Miss Westbrooke?"

"Yes, Colonel Sancroft," she answered, with a faint stress on his rank.

"How odd! How very odd!" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Not very," said Althea. "I am staying at Nutfield. Colonel Sancroft, Miss Dodd. I don't think you have met before."

Sancroft stiffened slightly, and looked more like his father as he bowed.

"Afraid we frightened your pony, Miss Dodd. It is my fault. I made them put a cartridge under the

tree. I've blown down a good many trees in my time ; but then there were no roads to think of. It's a blundering piece of sapper's work, and I'm really very sorry."

"It doesn't matter in the least, Colonel Sancroft," said Sybil sweetly. "We can go to Falconoke by the road."

She spoke so prettily that the Colonel unstiffened.

"Couldn't hear of such a thing, Miss Dodd. If you don't mind waiting a minute we'll clear a way for you."

Then he turned to the men, set the old woodman to work at a bough with a saw, three others to haul away at the smashed fragments, and when the task was in full swing returned to the cart to express his pleasure at Miss Westbrooke's success, of which he had "often read in newspapers."

"Evidently he doesn't prepare his speeches in advance as Mr. Bagshott does," thought Sybil.

"My laurels are only poor little stage laurels," said Althea ; "but thank you for not forgetting them."

Sybil looked down on her brown gloves holding the brown reins, wondering what there had been between them.

"Miss Dodd and I saw you arrive at Falconoke yesterday," resumed Althea.

"Oh, yes ; everyone's been awf'ly kind," said the Colonel prosaically, patting Pet's smooth sides. "A fine little mare of yours, Miss Dodd."

"Yes," said Sybil ; "and easier than she looks to drive."

"Ah," said the Colonel, "indeed !"

There was a slight pause. He was considering what he ought to say. The unexpected picking up of the acquaintance with Miss Westbrooke, after the sentimental leave-taking in the firwood behind the training school, was difficult to bridge gracefully. "I made a young ass of myself," reflected the Colonel.

A horse-fly settled on Pet, whose skin quivered. Sancroft brushed it off.

"Troublesome things," said he. "I've known them send ponies mad in Burmah. By the by, Miss Dodd, I greatly appreciated all the kind things your father said yesterday, but I'm afraid I didn't make my gratitude very clear. You see, I'm not much of an orator."

He looked up at her and smiled genially. Her face was wistful, and he perceived she wanted to be kind.

"I'm sure you said all that was right," said Sybil.

"I hope I did," said the Colonel. "However, I may have the pleasure of seeing Sir Francis soon. I shall come over to Nutfield directly I've had time to look round a bit."

"He will be delighted to see you," said Sybil.

Meanwhile the men had hacked and sawed a gap.

"There be room now, Master Gerald," said the old woodman.

"Lead her through," said the Colonel.

The groom obeyed, and stopped on the other side of the obstruction.

"Thank you, Colonel Sancroft," said Miss Dodd, signalling to the lad to leave the mare's head.

"Not at all," said the Colonel, raising his hat.

The cart dashed off, and disappeared round the next curve.

He stood looking down the road after it a moment.

"She's prettier than ever," he thought. "The other's pretty too. But after India every woman at home seems a Venus. It was awkward. Luckily she seemed quite ready to forget all that nonsense."

Then turning from the uprooted tree he walked slowly home across the fragrant woodland.

"Not in the least like meeting a hero," said Sybil.

"Not the least," replied Althea; "although he did make an explosion to warn us to rise to the occasion."

"But we didn't rise," said Sybil.

"No, we didn't," Althea admitted.

And that was all they could say about Colonel Sancroft.

## CHAPTER IX

RONALD DODD considered it unbecoming in a poet to be a docile, domestic creature, capable of pasturing contentedly on the pale joys of his own fireside. He had often discussed the problem of the poet's higher life with his friend Bagshott; but, although he appeared to be speaking of that irritable race as a class, he was really thinking of himself.

"A poet can't put on his singing mantle as though it were a smoking jacket," he said, "but must live in it though it be a shirt of Nessus, burning not only the wearer but all who come into his contact."

The idea struck him as picturesque and he clung to it, pointing out that the destructive element in the poet was chiefly manifest in dealings with women, "who, in all societies and in all ages, have been supporters of tradition." Marriage, as a protective institution, might, he admitted, be necessary to the State, but it was a fatal barrier to the growth of genius.

When he talked thus he had not the faintest idea that he was a prig, although he detected and detested priggishness in others.

But when Bagshott pointed out the subversive

character of such doctrine in the baronetage, Ronald explained that he was not thinking of himself, and that, as the only son of his father, he should probably marry some day, although the time was not yet.

But whatever he was openly, secretly his views were changing. Here was a woman—a beautiful woman of rare talents, who had recognised his poetic gifts as no one had ever recognised them before—standing out as a brilliant exception in a sex unmeet to mate with genius! When Althea had led him on the stage to share their common triumph, the thin edge of a broadening wedge of passion, such as wry-necked, morbid temperaments alone feel, had entered the poet's hot, selfish little heart; but although he believed that she had learned to appreciate him as a poet, he was not quite convinced she recognised his merits as a man. "I can wait," he thought, and the feeling which he hid carefully he nursed luxuriously, until contrary forces grew strong and his tortures began.

Meanwhile Colonel Sancroft's honours were not confined to the reception and public address at Falconoke. There was to be a public dinner at Olchester; Sir Francis Dodd, as the organiser of the banquet, had been invited to take the chair; the Duke of Southshire was to propose the guest's health. Three days before the dinner the Colonel walked gravely over to Nutfield, and made his first formal call

The necessity of this visit had been discussed with Sir Rupert, who had declared that if Sir Francis Dodd had been active in honouring his son it was for the sake of reflected glory—a view Gerald Sancroft privately considered absurd. It was no doubt mortifying that the Dodds should have captured the seat, but the country was coming to its senses, and it might be won back at some future election. The Colonel, moreover, considered it poor strategy to pick a quarrel with a man of influence who is conciliatory; besides, Sir Francis Dodd was liked in the county, and Miss Dodd seemed a very nice girl indeed.

Sir Rupert at this had frowned and stroked his chin, yet on the whole was inclined to be guided by his son. If the man would only haul down his flag, Sir Rupert thought he might tolerate him; but the confounded thing was the first object he saw in the morning when he looked out of his window, and he regarded it as the symbol of extreme impudence. There were only two men in the county who flew flags—the Duke of Southshire at Olchester Castle was the other!

Whilst Miss Sancroft agreed with her father as to the iniquity of the flag-flying, she was on her brother's side as to the propriety of calling at Nutfield. The moment she considered propitious for the exercise of magnanimity on their part, besides personally she rather liked Miss Dodd, although the

brother who wrote songs for the music-hall stage seemed an exceedingly feeble youth.

"Songs for the music-hall stage, Charlotte!" said her brother. "Why, he wrote that thing 'Voltigia' for Miss Westbrooke. The Commander-in-Chief told me to go and see it when I dined with him; there's nothing like it, he says. And d'you know, I met Miss Westbrooke years ago when the regiment was in North Wales. I remember the band played at a bazaar in Llandudno, and some of us went over. Miss Westbrooke sang. She was a parson's daughter at a training college, but went on the stage. I saw in the papers when I was in Allahabad last rains that she draws a hundred a week—pounds, not rupees!"

"Good heavens, how these people are paid!" exclaimed Miss Sancroft, who dressed on fifty pounds a year.

When Colonel Sancroft walked up the drive, the Dodds and their guests were drinking tea under the trees on the lawn. He walked very erect, with hands clasping a cane behind his back, absorbed in his thoughts.

"It is Colonel Sancroft," said Sybil, conscious of feeling quite unreasonably pleased.

"Eh? what! So it is!" said Sir Francis, fixing his glasses on his nose. He also was pleased, for he thought that all the conciliation ought not to be on one side.

But the Colonel marched along without seeing the



group till he reached the edge of the lawn, where Sir Francis met him with restrained effusiveness. And then after preliminary greetings he sat on a garden seat next to Lady Dodd and made himself amiable to everybody, whilst the conversation skimmed over the surface of things—a common acquaintance or two conveniently bridging the difficulties.

The Colonel, introduced to Bagshott, discovered that he had met his cousin, Captain Beal-Bagshott, at Simla—a first-rate polo-player and most excellent sportsman. Then he glanced across at Althea Westbrooke, who had so far remained silent. Did she remember singing “Where the Bee Sucks” at Llandudno?

“Do you know, Miss Westbrooke,” he added, “I have never heard you sing since.”

“I have improved a little since then,” said Althea demurely.

“Improved!” said the Colonel. “You should have heard the Commander-in-Chief at dinner on Friday. ‘Mind you see Miss Westbrooke in “Voltigia” before you go out again,’ he said, ‘there’s nothing like it.’”

The Colonel paid his compliment so artlessly that even Ronald Dodd, who had no taste for a back seat, was not displeased, and Sybil thought “he can say things which would seem ridiculous in any other man.”

After this the visitor listened with respect whilst

Ronald explained the inner significance of "Voltigia", which was as difficult to see as a rainbow's shadow, exclaiming at appropriate moments "I see," "Quite so," "A most delicate fancy." From "Voltigia" they passed to the recent campaign.

The worst of making a fuss over a man lucky enough to get through a decent piece of soldiering, Sancroft thought, was its unfairness to others every bit as good whose names didn't get in the newspapers. But then Lady Dodd must have noticed the modern craze for overdoing things.

But Lady Dodd, remembering how liberally her husband encouraged certain Southshire organs which supported his political views, protested that "after all, they could not get on without newspapers," to which Colonel Sancroft agreed, but made a diversion by patting Sybil's pretty poodle Minx. He was so fond of poodles; they could do anything but talk, as no doubt Miss Dodd had often been told. A man in his regiment had taken one out to India, but it was killed by a cobra bite.

The Colonel told the simple story in his pleasant, unfussy soldier's voice, and then departed, leaving an agreeable impression behind him. The contrast between the brilliancy of his achievements and the simple modesty of his manners excited even Ronald's admiration.

"Colonel Sancroft's brain seems to work slowly and he is not much of a talker, but he's every inch a

soldier. But then," he added as a corrective, "he's nothing else."

"I think that's quite enough for one man," said Althea.

"And so do I," said Sybil.

## CHAPTER X

THE Colonel's visit to Nutfield led to what newspapers call a *rapprochement* between the Sancrofts and Dodds. On the part of Sir Rupert the change was from an hostile and visible aloofness to an attitude of a frigid courtesy quite remote from friendship, yet serviceable for purposes of unfamiliar social intercourse.

It chanced that when Althea's visit to Nutfield was approaching its close that Sir Francis and Lady Dodd were contemplating certain festivities which her assistance would render completely triumphant. But Sir Francis had scruples, and hesitated to ask for help.

"I can't," he said to his daughter, "ask Miss Westbrooke to sing and dance after dinner, but couldn't you or Ronald throw out the hint?"

Now, Althea's empire was her art, and she desired that Colonel Sancroft should see how she swayed it, and when Sybil spoke of the entertainment which her father proposed to give, after the Olchester banquet, in joint honour of the Duke of Southshire and the Colonel, she "wondered whether they would like her to do 'Voltigia.'" At this all Nutfield

stirred with excitement. The house, as Sir Francis repeated more often than necessity demanded, was "admirably adapted for dramatic performances." At the end of the great hall was a vast conservatory full of rare exotics, and ferns and palms of tropical dimensions, that made a miniature forest of green, filled the air with moist, warm odours, and even defied the bitterness of mid-winter. The domed glass house, opening with big folding doors on the spacious hall, was given over to the enterprise of carpenters from the Emyrean. All day long the hammers banged through the house till the great fernery assumed the aspect of a theatre ; and later, the lime-light man, from a point of vantage, made experiments which astounded the moths, and perhaps bore strange dreams to the sleeping plants.

The work was in full swing when Sir Francis went to Olchester to take the chair at the "Colonel Sancroft Banquet." The manœuvre which he desired to carry out was a perfectly simple one. His object was to induce the Duke to dine and sleep at Nutfield, and so do honour to his house, and to advertise his triumph to the county by inviting it to see Miss Westbrooke in "Voltigia." If this blameless stratagem brought ancient Falconoke nearer to prosperous Nutfield, Sir Francis felt that his victory would be complete ; but whether or not the Duke came, or Sir Rupert sulked behind his park gates, the undertaking was one making for popularity throughout the

division, which he was anxious to keep in a good temper.

At the Olchester dinner Sir Francis was eloquent, the Duke tactful, Colonel Sancroft brief and soldierly, and the guests enthusiastic. When the speeches were over, and whilst the Duke was placidly smoking, Sir Francis opened his guileless attack, whilst his Grace smiled indulgently. The request was one which could be conceded. Certainly it would afford both the Duchess and himself pleasure to witness Miss Westbrooke's performance. Then he mentioned a convenient date. At this generous concession the new baronet glowed with honest satisfaction, and took the necessary steps for the distribution of his triumph. Pretty paragraphs cropped up in the proper places, and soon the whole of England learnt through the medium of our admirable press that "the Duke and Duchess would be the guests of Sir Francis Dodd at Nutfield on the occasion of Miss Westbrooke's private performance."

Armed with the ducal promise, Sir Francis took measures to appease the Falconoke hostility. The Colonel was consulted, and, as the result of some dexterous diplomacy, Miss Sancroft and Lady Dodd exchanged visits, and Sir Rupert's card reposed for the first time in the Nutfield silver tray. But Sir Rupert could not be tempted even by such a bait as his "old friend the Duke."

"Tell the man I won't dine with him till he hauls down his confounded flag," he said to his son.

"Don't think we can very well interfere with his flag, sir," replied the Colonel mildly. "That's his weakness."

"Well, it's time it was cured," growled the old baronet.

However, an excuse was made for Sir Rupert, and as his house was represented by his son and daughter, the Dodd victory was satisfactory.

At this point in its history Nutfield thrilled with pleasant excitement, and Ronald, seizing the opportunity of recapturing the foreground, from which he had slightly receded, added another verse to "Voltigia," containing a delicate compliment to Colonel Sancroft, of which Althea fully approved.

And so the dinner came; the Dodds' *chef* surpassed himself, and the guests were in a good temper. Perhaps the conversation would have been more brilliant if the Duke had been wittier and Sir Francis less fussy; but Althea atoned for the dullness of others, and the Duchess, almost as affable as her husband, actually hoped that she might some day have the pleasure of seeing Miss Westbrooke at the castle, after she had learnt that the Bishop of St. Ursula had approved of her courage in selecting the stage as a profession.

In fact, Althea shone as she had intended to shine. She amused the Duke, won over the Duchess, filled Colonel Sancroft with wondering admiration, and dispelled the air of severity which Miss Sancroft had imported from Falconoke.

But no one guessed the source and object of her magic.

"He shall see," thought Althea, "that I am no longer a silly schoolgirl to be kissed on the sly," although she had never grudged him the kisses.

The Colonel, whose perceptions were keener than his grave eyes suggested, not wholly missing her signals, began to wonder whether he was on the edge of a new adventure.

In the few minutes they spent in the drawing-room, before the stage was ready for the performance, the Duchess monopolised him and said :

"That is a most remarkable young woman."

He followed her Grace's curious glance till it fixed itself on Ronald Dodd and Althea eagerly discussing a question of stage management.

"Look at them!" added the Duchess. "Now tell me, Colonel Sancroft, does it mean anything?"

"They are what is called collaborators," he replied, not without malice.

"Ah! that means," said the Duchess, "that he dances to her piping. Still it would be a good thing for her. She can't spend all her life on the stage. Some nice young man ought to marry her. I shall tell the Bishop to give her a hint."

The conversation was little to the Colonel's taste. He even preferred the Duchess on Indian frontier politics, a subject on which she proceeded to enlighten him whilst the rising tide of guests were finding their



appointed places under the guidance of experts borrowed from the Theatre Royal, Olchester.

Now the Duchess had singled out Colonel Sancroft to do him honour because she deemed it her duty, and because the duty was a pleasant one. When, therefore, Sir Francis approached to lead her to the allotted place of dignity, she resolutely declared her intention of sitting by Colonel Sancroft ; and, taking his arm, marched him off, meekly followed by her host, whose plans her decision had somewhat disarranged.

An expert from the Empyrean controlled the lighting of the hall and stage, and when the three hundred guests were seated a dim twilight fell on them, whilst the orchestra, under Signor Ruffoni, played the introduction.

"Very effective," murmured the Duchess.

"Very indeed," acquiesced the Colonel, who was probably the only man in the audience who had never heard it.

But the curtain rose on the background of ferns and palms, a murmur of approval stirred the audience, a tall figure, shadowy and beautiful, appeared on the shaft of golden light. Sancroft could see Althea's eyes gleaming. Their glitter recalled their parting in the firwood and, by association, the troop-ship shouldering her way across the Biscay swell.

"What does she think of all that now ?" wondered the Colonel.

"How lovely she looks !" murmured the Duchess.

Then the violins curled and eddied, and Althea began to weave her spell of balanced song and dance. The joy of art, and the joy of something beyond art too, reached the audience as the voice chased the clarionets like echoes in a mountain valley, and the draperies stirred, now like waving corn, now like moonlit waters. But when the last verse was reached, they fell into motionless folds, and Althea stood still as a statue, with only the soft fires in her eyes stirring. For a moment the audience hung on the edge of expectancy; a kettledrum rolled, the lilt of a martial measure followed. Then all guessed what was coming.

"Ah! I believe it's my turn now," thought the Colonel.

For whom were the laurels of which she sang? A soft hand seemed crowning him in the gloom. Public compliments were usually crude and clumsy; this was quaint and touching.

The last note died away, the curtain fell, the lights flashed up; there was a storm of applause, interrupted by the Duke, who rose and said:

"I believe I am only expressing the wish of the audience if I request Miss Westbrooke to repeat the verse composed in honour of the gallant soldier who is here to-night."

Twilight again descended; the curtain rose; Althea reappeared on her shaft of golden light like a goddess flying on a radiant message. The verse with its martial embroidery was repeated, but now the

singer turned towards Colonel Sancroft's chair and the message became personal.

The excitement had intensified ; those at the end of the hall had mounted on chairs.

This time when the song ended, the curtain remained up and the singer stood motionless in her place, whilst cries of " Sancroft," " Colonel Sancroft," mingled with the applause.

"Get up and say something pretty," said the Duchess.

Then he rose, and, forgetting the audience, spoke only to Althea.

" Since I have been home, Miss Westbrooke," he said, in his clear soldier's voice, "I have been honoured far beyond my deserts, but no compliment has given me more pleasure, and none has touched me—none, I repeat, has touched me so deeply as that which I owe to you."

The applause drowned his words ; Althea, with shining eyes, curtsied low to him.

" Don't forget the author," said the Duchess.

" I have also to thank Mr. Ronald Dodd for his generous share in this beautiful compliment," resumed the Colonel, when his voice could be heard.

Then he sat down, the curtain descended, and the agitated assembly recovered its calm.

" You forgot the people," said the Duchess.

" It's too late now," said the Colonel, " but it was a beautiful compliment."

" Very beautiful," said the Duchess.

## CHAPTER XI

THE next morning, after the Duke and the Duchess had taken their departure, a certain flatness descended upon Nutfield, which had been screwed up to a pitch of excitement rare in its annals. Only the hammering of the carpenters remained to symbolise yesterday's rejoicings. Ronald Dodd heard them, even on the lawn where he was standing in the pale afternoon September sun. They seemed to be driving ugly, jealous nails into his heart. His eyes were haggard, because he had slept ill ; a civil war was raging in his conscience, nor could he disentangle the struggling emotions.

"Must I, like the rest of them," he wondered—and by "the rest of them," he meant the poets who have suffered overthrow in their dealings with women—"must I, too, make the inevitable sacrifice?" Was he, the proud, the daring, the high-souled—for this is how he saw himself—to fling himself at a woman's feet and say, "Love me, for pity's sake, love me!"

Hitherto he had kept his affections within comfortable bounds, analysing their flutterings, and toying with them "for literary purposes." His love affairs

till now had merely stimulated pastoral fancies. Their lyrical elasticity had been regulated in equal parts by the teachings, or rather, what young Ronald regarded as the teachings, of Shelley on one side and of Catullus on the other, as these self-indulgent examples had been modified by sympathy with the modern school of French *décadents*. He had held that the poet enjoyed a special license for picking and stealing among the loveliest flowers of the affections; if the robber sang prettily of his predatory exploits, atonement enough was made.

But now this selfish complacency had vanished; Ronald Dodd was jealous. He believed there was more between Sancroft and Althea than she admitted. They might even have been lovers in the past. He had only overheard a few words when they had parted after the "Voltigia" performance. Colonel Sancroft had said, "I shall never forget your magnificent compliment." Althea had replied that there were a few things she too remembered. Whatever she meant Sancroft had understood. His face proved that as much as Althea's shining eyes. There was, of course, another aspect. She might have been hypnotised by the fame ("cheap newspaper fame" Ronald Dodd called it) which had converted a lucky soldier into a romantic hero. For all the women, from the Duchess downwards, had placed Sancroft on a ridiculous pedestal, where they offered him incense and competed for his approval. But

then, Ronald argued, Althea Westbrooke was not the sort of woman to make a fool of herself over a man because, for the moment, he was basking in the temporary warmth of newspaper praise. She, who almost lived in paragraphs herself, understood its value too well to be affected.

Thus Ronald Dodd chased suspicions round his mind. One of the ugliest was that Althea had been less interested in him since Colonel Sancroft's return.

She was to leave Nutfield to-morrow. The moment was favourable for an explanation. His mother and sister were making calls at Wraxted; Sir Francis was absent with the bailiff; Althea, who had excused herself on the plea of business letters, was writing at Lady Dodd's lacquered table in the morning-room, the French windows of which opened on to the verandah which ran along that side of the house. He made a reconnaissance, and, approaching the window, said :

"Please don't waste all the afternoon writing to fussy people."

"They are not all of them fussy," she answered, addressing an envelope whilst he watched her.

"Come for a turn," he continued ; "the afternoon is lovely, and your last."

Before answering she folded and stamped her letter, and placed it in her pocket.

"I will see that your letters are posted," said he.

She handed him a little pile.

"Is that all?" he asked, remembering the one omitted.

"Yes, that's all," she said.

He rang and gave them to the footman, and then they both stepped out into the pale sunshine. She was wearing a dress of tan-coloured cloth matching the fading tints, and her head was bare. Half absorbed in her own thoughts, half in the beauty of the hour, she was ill-prepared for the attack that he planned, but which her air of complete unsuspicion made difficult to deliver.

They walked slowly over the lawn to a rustic seat, hidden from the house by a group of bushes. There was a faint sense of falling leaves in the air, a squirrel darted across the sunny space between the tree trunks and the robins piped. In the distance the red turret of Falconoke stood out against the western sky, slowly growing a delicate pink.

"It is Keats's autumn," said Althea, unsuspecting, but wondering at his silence.

Few conversations follow the lines marked out for them by the impulsive; usually they rush down the declivities of feeling to the bottom of the emotions. The charm of Althea and the soft radiance of the day were calming the poet's splenetic mood. His approach was that of a petitioner rather than of a claimant. Still he rushed to the attack impetuously, and without preliminary skirmishing.

"Althea!" he exclaimed. "There's something I must say."

Then at a glance she interpreted the agitation of his face. Usually he talked with quaint and nimble preciosity of phrase, but now all his little tricks had vanished.

She made a vain effort to stop him.

"Don't spoil my last day at Nutfield, Mr. Dodd, by saying something better never said."

"No good ever came of concealing the truth!" he answered.

"I thought that society only existed comfortably in consequence of its partial suppression," she returned, trying to stop his rush with one of his own doctrines.

"That's only an attitude," he replied. "Attitudes are shields to hide us from ourselves. We only find ourselves when we find love. I used to pretend the right symbol of love was a fool with a bauble; but now I know better, because I love you as the earth loves that faint amber light! There is only one kind of love, and no philosophy in that, only beautiful, unutterable feeling. Listen, Althea! Chance, by a happy effort, has flung together two souls steeped in the same fires. No one will ever understand you as I do. You are beautiful as a woman, you are noble as an artist—a creature of dew and fire, to be loved and cherished. Ah! And I can help you too. With me at your side you would stoop to no mean triumphs, whilst you have the power to raise my



imagination as the wind lifts a leaf. Althea, oh, Althea, I love you—oh, I love you ! ”

And he seized her hands and tried to kiss her, but she turned aside with a troubled face.

Then for a moment they looked at each other, Althea perplexed and embarrassed, Ronald Dodd pale and almost trembling. A hundred obstacles had sprung up between them.

“ I was not prepared for this,” she said at last.

“ You knew—you must have known—what I felt.”

“ No, no ! ” she said. “ I wish you had never spoken.”

It seemed to him that her personal atmosphere grew colder. The soft lines round her mouth had tightened, the space between her brows contracted.

“ I had to speak,” he answered. “ There must be no mistake. I ask you to marry me. If you will, I’ll spend the rest of my life in trying to make you happy.”

There was no doubting his sincerity. Althea reflected a moment and said :

“ You have done me great honour—but such a marriage would be a terrible mistake. I don’t think that I shall ever marry. A woman in my position has no right to marry, and I don’t think I shall ever wish to. I see a thousand reasons against it.”

“ I see only one,” he answered miserably. “ You can’t love me.”

He looked so wretched that, although she was used to importunate lovers, she was touched.

"I do like you, Ronald, as a friend, very much. But women in my position—on the stage, I mean—see a side of life which doesn't quite encourage romance. I've had to fight my way up, and perhaps I've been hardened in the struggle. But now that I have everything a woman can want, I'm determined to enjoy life after my own fashion. You are a poet, and love a creature of your imagination whom you mistake for me."

Then she rose from the seat and stood above him.

"Come," she added soothingly, after a painful pause, "forget this conversation. I want to be your friend ; but how can I if you make love to me ? I'm very sorry, indeed, and very much flattered, but we must be reasonable. We should never have been friends unless I had believed you thought as I did."

"Will you swear you don't care for some other man, Althea ?"

"Of course I don't," she answered, flushing slightly. "Please don't make foolish suggestions."

This relieved him slightly, for it was a sort of panic terror lest some other man should capture his divinity that had driven him to speak. Her courage was high, and he believed in her sincerely. After all, his suspicions might be groundless. Moreover, vanity was coming again to the rescue. It was not, he thought, in a woman's nature to reject for long such

love as he was prepared to offer. The golden fruit is not to be had for the mere shaking of the tree.

But whilst these thoughts buzzed reassuringly in his train, Althea, still standing between him and the landscape, exclaimed :

“ There is Colonel Sancroft.”

“ What does he want ? ” asked Ronald savagely.

He was planning another appeal, and such an interruption at such a moment seemed intolerable.

Glancing round he saw Sancroft in riding dress swinging carelessly across the lawn towards them.

“ ‘ And the great Lord of Luna  
Comes with his stately stride, ’ ”

quoted Ronald. “ It’s odd ; but that man always reminds me of those terrible ‘ Lays of Ancient Rome. ’ ”

Althea marked the tone of contempt, but, although she resented it, let it pass. Ronald rose, and they walked to meet the Colonel.

“ How d’you do, Miss Westbrooke ; how d’you do, Mr. Dodd,” said the Colonel. “ The fact is, I have ridden over to ask a favour. I want a copy of your ‘ Voltigia,’ Mr. Dodd—I mean another copy, for I took one back with me last night—to send out to India to a man who is keen about those things.”

“ I shall be very pleased to let you have one,” said the poet, with cold courtesy.

“ Thank you so much. I was just riding round,

and I thought I would look in and ask you. The servant told me that I should find you in the garden. What a lovely evening, Miss Westbrooke! I hope you're not tired after last night. It was splendid—it was indeed!"

And so they walked back to the house, the Colonel chatting commonplaces to conceal his consciousness of having interrupted a conversation which Ronald's face suggested might contain painful elements.

Outside a groom was holding a big chestnut thoroughbred, a present from the Duke of Southshire.

"The fact is," said the Colonel, "the Duke, who is my godfather, was shocked to find there wasn't a horse at Falconoke fit to ride, and so he gave me one. Noble, wasn't it, Mr. Dodd?"

And then, whilst the groom led the horse up and down, the Colonel talked of its points to the poet, feeding his grievance deep in his little vexed breast. When Sancroft had finished this congenial topic, he discovered an appointment at Wraxted, and Ronald went up to his room for the famous copy of "Voltigia" with the choric group of nymphs and fauns, leaving Althea and the Colonel standing by the window of the morning-room, both faintly embarrassed. Bang, bang, went the carpenters' hammers.

"They seem busy," said the Colonel.

"They are removing the stage."

"I hope I haven't annoyed that young man," said the Colonel, with a glance towards the door by which Ronald had left.

"Why should you have?"

The Colonel smiled with genial malice.

"Thought he might have been reading you one of his poems, you know."

Althea was silent.

"Seems quite a clever fellow, though," continued the Colonel.

"He is clever," said she.

They had both wished to be alone; now they were alone they were surprised at the novelty of the feeling.

"It was odd meeting you again," said the Colonel, after a pause. "Do you remember—"

"We had better not remember," Althea interrupted.

"I can't help it," said he; "but I'll pretend not to, if you like, which is nearly the same thing. D'you know, when I heard you last night, somehow I went back to that troop-ship on a grim day in the Bay, with—well—with nothing nice to think about, you know."

Still Althea made no reply.

"You're not cross?" he continued.

"No."

"May I call on you when you are in town?"

After a little hesitation, she said:

"I have just written to tell you my days."

"When you are 'At Home'?"

"Yes."

"How kind of you not to forget me, especially as I made myself rather a nuisance. Have you forgotten? But perhaps you never knew that the Lady Superintendent wrote and complained to the Colonel."

Althea looked at him and smiled faintly.

"The Colonel told me 'not to make a young ass of myself,'" continued Sancroft, with his boyish smile. "But what a lot of things have happened since then! You have become famous, and sometimes I feel as old as Methusaleh."

"Too rapid promotion, perhaps," said Althea.

But here Ronald entered.

"Afraid I've given you a lot of trouble, Mr. Dodd," said the Colonel, glancing at the decorated card which the other handed him. "It's very pretty, indeed, with all those jolly little dancing figures round the margin. I wonder how you think of all those things. I shall have my copy framed as a souvenir. No, thanks! I mustn't stay. I've an engagement before dinner. Please tell Lady Dodd how much I enjoyed myself last night. 'Voltigia' was a tremendous surprise to me after eight years of India."

Then the Colonel wished them good-bye, and in a few moments they saw him cantering down the drive.

"He rides well," said the poet; "but for a hero doesn't he strike you as a little childish?"

"Perhaps that is because he is trying to come down to our level," said Althea.

The colour ran round the poet's pretty blue eyes; but he was too angry to retort.

## CHAPTER XII

A WOMAN is rarely offended with a man for falling in love with her unless the tribute to her charms is completely outbalanced by the annoyance of his courtship. But such cases are exceptional. As a rule women suffer admiration gladly—so long as it does not make them ridiculous. Even when it does they are last to see it.

Althea Westbrooke was not unaccustomed to such situations as Ronald Dodd's declaration had created. Practised in dealing with tiresome lovers, she was desirous of preventing this one from reaching the oppressive stage, partly because she admired his poetry, partly because she desired to avoid complications with Nutfield, but especially because she desired that Colonel Sancroft should not hear of it. On the other hand, Ronald might continue in the band of admirers who asked nothing in return.

Before she left Nutfield they had an explanation in which she soothed him with the most carefully chosen flowers of flattery. There must, she said, be no misunderstanding between them, because a woman could not afford to throw away a friendship so dear to



her pride and stimulating to her art as that which he so generously had offered. From this point, by an almost imperceptible descent in sentiment, she left him with the impression that although she had rejected his proposal it was because he was a man of genius, and in that capacity excluded from the dull sect, who,

“ With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,  
The weariest and the longest journey go.”

In fact, she exhibited the young man to himself as the fiery spirit unmeet for matrimony which he had believed himself to be before his plunge, and knowing her readiness to show the door to obtrusive lovers, he ended in accepting the refusal as one which, from its very nature, could not be final.

The afternoon after her departure Ronald spent in the park nursing a mood of soft melancholy. He had become the hero of a poetic drama, and his horizons were tinged with colours in which romance and real passion were inextricably blended. He knew it was the poet's destiny to teach in song what he had learnt in sorrow, and, resigning himself to his fate, found relief in a sonnet entitled “Within the Gates” which Althea read and understood in the October number of *The Vortex*, the unremunerative periodical for which Sir Francis helped to find the funds in order to provide his son's muse with a perch to sing on.

Having despatched his sonnet to the editor with the request that it might be printed on the front page in leaded type, Ronald, accompanied by a young Oxford admirer (also a supporter of *The Vortex*) left Nutfield for a tour in Northern Italy, but not before his gloom had raised in Lady Dodd suspicions which her daughter endeavoured to allay.

Sybil was sure there was nothing between them. There were never two persons, in her opinion, more determined to remain single. Of course Ronald admired Miss Westbrooke—every man did—but she was well known to have refused Lord Cossitor—the Earl of Elmington's second son—on the ground that marriage for a woman in her position was ridiculous.

"But Ronald is not Lord Cossitor," said Lady Dodd fully persuaded that it was only a question of "ask and have" with her accomplished son.


Meanwhile Falconoke and Nutfield were growing friendlier, proud Falconoke stooping, practical Nutfield rising in the movement towards neighbourly conciliation. This understanding was the joint work of Miss Sancroft—aided by her brother—and of Miss Dodd, whose popularity and charm in the eyes of the county had atoned for the pomposity of her father and the eccentricity of a brother who posed as a poet and despised sportsmen, instead of endeavouring to acquire (in the wake of better men than himself) those accomplishments which go to make a country gentleman.

Whether Miss Sancroft had definite motive for her

altered attitude towards Nutfield was too delicate a point for her pride to consider, still she belonged to a generation in social matters more practical than her father's, nor did she quite forget that Sybil was the most desirable heiress in the county and Sir Francis Chairman of the Oloptic Land Company which held a heavy mortgage on the Falconoke property. Still, whatever she may have thought herself, her friends did not omit to observe that she had taken no steps to cultivate the friendship of Miss Dodd until her brother's return from India.

The day on which Sybil drove herself over to Falconoke to lunch was an event. Although somewhat in awe of Sir Rupert, she was conscious of the defensive value of the meek weapons she had learnt to use. Her smile—with the pleading message conveyed in it—was appealing enough to thaw icier fridity than his. Her eyes seemed to say "Try to be kind to me," and Sir Rupert, taking their meaning, thought "there is nothing of the Dodd about her," and unbent himself with a delicate courtesy that touched her.

After lunch Colonel Sancroft invited her to a game of bowls on the famous green where Charles II. had played his ancestor, Sir Percival, for fifty guineas. Sir Percival, like a loyal subject and intelligent courtier, had been badly beaten, and the King had marked his approval by the gift of the splendidly-wrought fire-dogs which still adorned the great open chimney of the hall.



When the game was over Sybil walked round the garden with Sir Rupert, who stopped near the ancient sun-dial to show her the view.

"You can," he said, "see your father's house plainly, and the—eh—banner, too."

Then it flashed on her painfully that the old man hated the obtrusive Nutfield flag, and his hostility which, a few weeks before, she would have mocked as ridiculous, now seemed natural and just.

"No wonder," she reflected, "that he doesn't like us."

Then she thought of the stately old man at her side, of the pride and pinched fortunes of his house, and of his gallant son—"the bravest soldier in all England"—and longed to strike the flag in unconditional surrender.

They stood in silence side by side looking towards Nutfield.

"I think I should prefer the view without papa's flag," was all she could say.

"Indeed," returned Sir Rupert; "but no doubt it serves a useful purpose."

She had taken the hint so sweetly that he regretted having given it. As a peace offering he picked for her a rose from the briar which clambered round the dial, and cast a waving shadow on the crumbling stone.

A little later, when Sir Rupert was handing her into the cart, he hoped that she would often come to

see them ; then, as she drove down the ill-kept avenue, he praised her pony, her cart, and her driving.

"There is nothing of the Dodd about her, Charlotte," he observed to his daughter. "I showed her her father's flag and she was quite ashamed of it."

His conscience was uneasy, for he thought that he had wounded her feelings ; but he never guessed that he had filled her with a resolve.

The flag, Sybil remembered, had first been hoisted when her father had won the seat. Now it must come down ! There could be no disgrace in striking it since it represented rather a personal advertisement than a principle.

Having reached home Sybil went straight to her mother and said :

"Mother, you must tell papa to haul down the flag !"

Then Lady Dodd, after hearing her daughter's reasons, replied :

"My dear Sybil, you are as sensitive as Ronald."

Now it chanced at that time that Sir Francis sought to escape the catastrophe threatening his party, then on the verge of being rent asunder on a great national question.

After the anticipated defeat of the ministry, which he now only nominally supported, it was understood that the re-election of the leading mutineers would be unopposed in order that they might, under a

changed name, be absorbed in the ranks of the conquering opposition. The political mountain was in labour, and Sir Francis hoped to be born again ; but whether he was or not depended to some extent on the attitude of Sir Rupert Sancroft. To gain the Falconoke alliance, Nutfield was ready to sacrifice a whole wilderness of flags. When, therefore, Lady Dodd conveyed Sybil's message to her husband (who was not sensitive), she was relieved to find that he accepted the proposal rather as an original move in a conciliatory campaign than a humiliating sacrifice of pride.

"How does it strike you, my dear?" he asked.

"I think that Colonel Sancroft admires Sybil," returned his wife, who was less interested in the political than in the social aspect of the problem.

Sybil, at a word from her mother, walked boldly into the study, sat in the chair opposite her father, and said :

"So mamma has told you!"

"Your mother informs me that you are under the impression that Sir Rupert objects to our flag," answered Sir Francis, with that air of restrained power with which he was wont to importune the chiefs of his own party ; "but I am naturally anxious to learn the grounds of your opinion."

"You want to know why I think the flag ought to come down?" said his daughter.

"Yes,"

"Because it looks pompous; because Sir Rupert sees it every time he looks out of his bedroom window, and is reminded that you have won his seat; because no one else in the county flies one except the Duke of Southshire, whose great-grandfather hoisted it after the battle of Waterloo as a signal to his tenantry."

But Sir Francis was not crushed by the comparison.

"Did Sir Rupert say all this?" he asked.

"Is it likely?"

"One never knows what rash statements a man's prejudice may drive him to make," observed her father.

"'Rash speeches,' papa! Why, no one could have been nicer than Sir Rupert. He only said when I was walking round the garden with him, 'You can see your father's banner'—not flag, but *banner*—'from here.' Then it dawned on me what a very offensive symbol it was, and I said it wasn't pretty. But Sir Rupert said, 'No doubt it served some useful purpose.' If you want to pay him a great compliment you will haul it down at once. I want particularly to be friends with the Sancrofts, not to be compelled to apologise for the flag every time I meet them."

Thus Sybil, who never scolded any one else but her father and mother, who both rather enjoyed it, spoke her mind.

"Hum!" said Sir Francis thoughtfully, "I'll think it over,"

But the next morning the flag had ceased to fly, and, for the first time for several weeks, Sir Rupert shaved himself without being reminded of the growing fortunes of the Dodds and his own waning prosperity.

Two days later Sybil met Colonel Sancroft on the threshold of the Wraxted post-office, and felt herself blushing foolishly. They shook hands, and she fancied he looked pleased to see her.

"I am very grateful to you, Miss Dodd," he began, "but don't know how to thank you."

"But there's nothing to thank me about," she answered shyly.

"Unless I am mistaken, you have persuaded your father to haul down his flag to please mine."

"But I never liked it," replied Sybil, placing her stamps in her purse.

"And you told him so?"

"Yes, I did tell him."

"We knew you had!" said the Colonel, smiling down on her pretty face very pleasantly, "and we shall never forget that the great compliment which Nutfield has paid to the unreasonable prejudices of Falconoke comes from you."

"Papa would never have flown his flag if he had thought for a moment it annoyed Sir Rupert," said Sybil, stepping into her cart and driving off in a strange flutter of happiness, for she had stepped into the magic circle, and Sancroft's little measure of gratitude filled her with delight.



## CHAPTER XIII

**EVEN** the spoilt children of fortune cannot escape their self-created troubles. It is when the world forgets to scourge us that we take up the whip for our own backs. Each man is his own blind inquisitor, and the women use the lash as freely as the men.

When Althea Westbrooke left Nutfield she took away with her an impression of Colonel Sancroft powerful enough to render discretion a guide of secondary importance. She believed that his professional ambition precluded all ideas of marriage from his mind, and that they were in consequence moving on parallel lines. In a vague cloud of blended pride and emotion she desired these lines to move smoothly side by side, and, more strongly than she had ever desired anything before outside the kingdom of her art, she longed to bring him within the circle of her fascinations. There is something almost pathetic in the longings of a woman whose beauty can sway great audiences, to encompass the partial victory of one man. Young men stood in the rain at the stage doors wherever she played to see

her step into her brougham, unencouraged but not unridiculed; now it seemed that she was standing on this soldier's threshold, humbly waiting for a smile. And so a pale melancholy thread ran through all her days, and the shadow of her tenderness fell on her art till the critics almost exhausted their vocabularies in praising its new beauties.

"If I were weak enough to love him," she thought, "he could never marry me, even if I would marry him," and, although the proved vigour of the man and his physical beauty which seemed its attribute, made her long to creep for protection under the splendid arch of his name and fame, she dismissed the vision as impossible. The poise of sentiment, however, did not permit her to reduce feeling to raw dimensions. Chiefly, she desired on his part some picturesque sacrifice to the power of her beauty. Let him recognise that she was transcendent, and she would be almost happy with the homage.

But what did happen was the unexpected. In the last week of her provincial tour, when she was performing in a great midland manufacturing town to crowded and enthusiastic audiences, she received a letter from the Duchess of Southshire.

Now the Duchess, who prided herself on being the best letter-writer in England, included herself, a little prematurely perhaps, among those literary ladies whose published correspondence has added a minor lustre to the literature of the eighteenth century.

The letter was in answer to a note which Althea had written to fix a date for a performance which she had promised to give in aid of a charity in which the Duchess was interested. Her Grace, who contributed occasionally to the popular magazines on subjects of domestic economy, kept a keen eye on the subjects likely to interest those to whom her communications were addressed, and her love of picturesque detail caused her to commit errors which, in the correspondence of less exalted personages, would be considered serious indiscretions.

In writing to Miss Westbrooke the relations of Nutfield to Falconoke appeared the most vivid subject of their common interest. She started philosophically.

"It is," she remarked, "curious to note the influence of our sex on conflicts in which prejudice and interest are opposed. The efforts of your charming friend Miss Dodd, as you probably know, have been crowned with success. 'Great Birnam wood has come to high Dunsinane hill,' or to be explicit, that amiable young lady has captured the Sancrofts, including, it is rumoured, the gallant Colonel himself; nor should I be surprised if the projected political alliance between the two families so strongly favoured by the Duke were followed by a still closer tie. But beshrew my pen for running away with my discretion, since you must be better informed on this matter than I!"

Althea sat with the letter in her hand and a novel

feeling in her heart of which hitherto in her experiences he had only felt the shadow; Mrs. Dormer at the other side of the table, pasting newspaper cuttings in a large book, looked at her across a big bowl of chrysanthemums.

"Bad news, dear?" she asked.

"N-no," said Althea doubtfully.

Then she glanced from the window at the sad sky, where the smoke wreaths from the tall factory chimneys were blending grimly with the pale mists of the sombre October day. The prospect was as dreary as her thoughts were bitter. Jealousy clamoured for action, but judgment suggested none.

"The letter is from the Duchess of Southshire about a charity performance," she added, after a pause, during which Mrs. Dormer wondered why the note had not been given her to read.

"Is the Duchess dictatorial?"

"Not in the least; she is most — condescending."

"I was afraid it was from that boy," said Mrs. Dormer drily.

"Mr Dodd?"

"Yes. He writes to you nearly every day. Don't let him make a fool of himself and get you talked about, Althea."

Mrs. Dormer felt that Althea had only told her half the truth of her visit to Nutfield, and was on the look-out for the remainder. Her belief in the dis-

cretion of her own sex was not great, and she saw indications of a change in Althea.

"You needn't be anxious," said Althea.

"But what are you worrying about?"

"Nothing; only this place is ugly and depressing—that's all."

"Shall I ring the bell for lights and tea?" asked Mrs. Dormer, seeking a woman's remedy.

"Yes, please."

"Something's up," she reflected, in her blunt way.

She had not yet heard of Colonel Sancroft, but she knew of the ardent courtship of the poet, and associated Althea's troubled face with some feminine weakness of resolution resulting from the appeals in sundry letters bearing foreign post-marks.

"Is Mr. Dodd back?" she asked, as she rang the bell.

"Yes. He has been at Nutfield for several days."

Then, reading in Althea's face the uselessness of further questioning, she desisted, and said:

"It is your last performance here to-night, Althea."

"Thank goodness, yes," said the other wearily.

When tea appeared the two women relapsed into silence.

"I shall end by being in her way," thought Mrs. Dormer, as she poured it out.

## CHAPTER XIV

WHATEVER stratagems humiliating to her pride might be weaving at Nutfield, Althea knew that Ronald Dodd would supply her with a key.

After she returned to town he was her first visitor. Full of disgust for the muddy streets, the gloom, and the murky reek of London atmosphere, he walked into her drawing-room to talk of his despair. But his discontent no longer seemed unreasonable to Althea. In secret she preferred it to the common-sense tests by which Mrs. Dormer measured the most complicated human passions. The poet sat down, full of suppressed nervous irritability.

"It is kind of you to call so soon," she said sweetly; "did you enjoy your holiday?"

"If you had answered my letters," he replied, "it would have been less like a penance."

"You know why I did not?"

"Because I broke the truce, I suppose."

"I thought we agreed to be friends and artists in sympathy—as far, at least, as one can try to be anything. You choose in your letters the only subject we can't talk about."

## The Heart of the Dancer

But she spoke gently, almost affectionately, and not as a woman defending a position that she has made impregnable. And so he hoped for the moment that their eyes surveyed the same horizons.

"I am glad," he replied, "that you say 'so far as one can try to be anything.' You give a dry crumb of comfort when I'm starving for a feast."

"But we are all starving for feasts."

She intended this admission for a ray of comfort.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "have you discovered that too?"

"No," said Althea resolutely, "I'm not a pessimist yet."

"Nor was I till you found you couldn't love me, and made me one."

She stopped him with a gesture.

"We can't be friends if you talk so wildly. But please ring the bell for tea."

She drew her low arm-chair nearer the fire as she spoke, whilst he sullenly obeyed.

"You're like the man in the French story," said he, "'je vous parle d'amour, vous me répondez—thé,' although it's 'veal' in the original."

Then in the warm glow of the firelight he recommenced his complaint, hardening it occasionally by bitter flashes, until she checked him by hinting that he was talking too much of his own feelings.

"Tell me," she said, "all the news from Nutfield."

"Oh, the place has been full of alarms and excur-

sions since you left," he replied petulantly. "Yesterday I had a ridiculous conversation with my father about 'my future.' As though any one but a man of business ever hoped to control that! He thinks I have done enough for literature, and wants me to take up politics. He seems to imagine it an easy change of professions. In the approaching hurly-burly of parties there might even be a seat for me!"

The fire danced contemptuously in the young man's peevish blue eyes.

"But why not do as he wishes?" asked Althea. "Your father's position is stronger than ever, and I suppose the—eh—alliance between Nutfield and Falconoke will strengthen it."

"You have grasped the situation, then," he said sarcastically. "No doubt you have heard from Sybil?"

"No, from the Duchess of Southshire."

"From the Duchess! What on earth did she write about?"

He was alert and curious now.

"Tempt me to no indiscretion," said Althea.

"The pretensions of the Dodds and the decayed glories of the Sancrofts used to be a favourite topic of hers, and you are a fresh hearer," said the poet, with an air of annoyed derision.

Althea intended to rouse him, and had succeeded.



"The Duchess said pretty things about 'both your houses,'" she said quietly.

"Her Grace is a privileged busybody, and deserves—well—lampooning. But does she approve of the alliance, as you call it?"

"Yes, she does approve. So does the Duke."

"I thought *he* was keen. But did she suggest we had other views beside political ones?"

"Not exactly, but she seemed to think that something romantic and sentimental might result from the understanding between your two families. Of course, the letter was quite vague."

In the interest surrounding it she had forgotten it was confidential. Their eyes met in the dancing fire-light, full of a different trouble. Forcing her words into a natural key, Althea said, after a pause:

"But you haven't told me, Mr. Dodd, whether this rumour's true."

"I believe Sybil likes Sancroft, and he seems attracted to her. I also believe Miss Sancroft encourages the idea, and I suspect Sir Rupert would not object. On our side my sister will be allowed to do exactly as she likes."

Althea heard the fire purring, and felt a dry heat at the back of her throat, but mastered it.

"I think it would be a most charming match," she answered calmly. "Distinguished soldiers are always supposed to marry the loveliest heiresses, and if it mean anything Colonel Sancroft is very lucky."

Here the servant brought tea; Mrs. Dormer followed it, and taking her place at the table poured it out whilst the poet handed the hot cakes.

Mrs. Dormer's manner seemed to say, "I hope you two have not been talking sentimental nonsense." She disliked Ronald Dodd because he was "trying to make a fool of Althea," whilst her presence in the same room as the poet "got," as he described it, "on his nerves." Besides, what respect could he possibly have for a woman who thought "Marmion" the finest poem in the English language, and made a point of never remembering that he was the author of a book of lyrics which a few chosen spirits admired? In the poet's eyes she was typical of the greater public who ignored his existence, not out of malice, but from unredeemed obtuseness of intellect.

Now Mrs. Dormer had desired "to have it out" with him for some time. The little sarcastic arrows, which he shot at her as a commonplace Philistine dwelling in the outer darkness of dullness, did not always miss the target, and she was persuaded that Althea would recover the peace of mind which she had lost if the "tiresome little poet would leave off worrying." She had, therefore, two reasons for attacking him, either of which seemed to her just and sufficient. An opportunity occurred that afternoon. A messenger came from the manager of the Imperial to see Miss Westbrooke, who left the two combatants

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together whilst she transacted her business in the adjoining room.

After one of those warning coughs of nervous rather than bronchial origin, which frequently herald unpleasant discussions, Mrs. Dormer said :

“ Another cup of tea, Mr. Dodd ? ”

“ No, thank you,” said the poet, ready to be bored the moment Althea left the room.

He rose and stood on the hearthrug. Had he been a wise youth he would long ago have propitiated his enemy, but as usual he had obeyed his impulses rather than his interests, and now that she was at his gates he knew it not till he heard her knock.

“ Mr. Dodd, there is something I want to say ! ” she began, in a firm voice that jarred on his nerves and astonished him as coming from a minute social atom whose views he naturally treated with disdain.

“ Indeed ! ” exclaimed the poet, frowning.

“ I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Mr. Dodd, and I must beg you not to repeat to Miss Westbrooke what I am going to say, but there is no one so much interested in her happiness as myself. Do you understand ? ”

“ Very imperfectly.”

“ I’ll try to be plain. Something is worrying her. She is quite changed. Surely you can understand me now ? ”

“ Not in the least,” he replied, stirring with exultation at the vision of Althea vainly struggling

against her love for him. If Althea married him, he reflected, the duenna disappeared. Her disapproval then became a compliment. He smiled at the thought, and his smile exasperated his assailant, and she flung courtesy to the winds.

"What I mean is this," she said. "It would be absurd in a woman in Althea's position to think of marrying a man in yours."

Then his smile dried up.

"You are not flattering," said he.

"No, I'm frank, which is better. Althea is not of your set; a marriage into your family would mean that she must leave the stage to which she is devoted. If you really are her friend and want her to be happy, you'll pack up all your sentiment—your odes, elegies, and sonnets, or whatever you call them—and take them out of her sight and leave her to carry on her work unhampered."

"Leave her," said Ronald Dodd contemptuously, "to 'darkness and to you.' What a fate! Why, I have done more to encourage her art in the few months I have known Miss Westbrooke than you have in all the years you have been her companion!"

This was true, although Mrs. Dormer was unaware of it.

"I'm not talking of art—I hate the very word," she retorted; "but of the practical things in life. Now, if I understood Althea, I might help her, and perhaps help you too. That is why I want an explanation."

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But the angry poet was beginning to lose his head.

"The explanation," said he hotly, "is simple enough. If you are her friend you will urge her to marry me. No one else will ever understand her so well or love her so much."

Here a new light began to dawn on Mrs. Dormer, who felt that she had blindly floundered into a big blunder. If Ronald Dodd wanted to marry Althea he could scarcely be the cause of her ill-concealed unhappiness, and so, surprise mastering discretion, she exclaimed:

"Good heavens! what an idiot I have made of myself."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, it's difficult to say nicely; but I'm terribly afraid it must be something else worrying her."

The brutal speech escaped her in spite of herself.

"Some other man, you mean?"

The poet felt that he was ceasing to be the hero of a poetic romance, and becoming the victim of a grim tragedy. Sancroft's shadow had fallen like a catastrophe across his path.

"Is there some other man, then?" she asked, curiosity conquering her pity.

"I have kept no account of her lovers," he said savagely.

Then he turned his back on her, and muttered something that sounded like a curse.

Mrs. Dormer looked at the young man's head,

where the glossy hair just touched the tall white collar, wondering what his face was like, and surprised that one who talked so glibly of art and kindred trifles should be pricked to frenzy by a mere suspicion. Before she had decided whether it were worth while trying to soothe him he turned and faced her.

"May I request you to make my excuses to Miss Westbrooke," he said, "and to assure her that I will refrain from bothering her with my 'odes, elegies and sonnets'—I think that was your phrase—until I have her permission and your sanction."

Then, before she had time to reply, he hurried from the room and she heard the front door slam.

Mrs. Dormer had enough sense of humour to laugh at herself for the muddle she had made of it, but it never occurred to her that her rough-and-ready implements were a ridiculous equipment for so delicate a task.

"Why has Mr. Dodd gone?" Althea asked, when she returned.

"Because he was tired of waiting for you," said Mrs. Dormer.

Then Althea looked at her companion with suspicion, foreseeing the day when she might be in the way.

## CHAPTER XV

IT chanced that the official records of the campaign in which Sancroft had played so brilliant a part needed editing and compiling, and that the Commander-in-Chief, anxious to help a promising soldier of distinguished ability but narrow means, offered the appointment to him.

Although temporary, it was lucrative as well as honourable; and since it would occupy him until he must return to India as A.D.C. to the coming Viceroy, the young Colonel accepted it without hesitation.

The pleasant monotony of Falconoke, in spite of the Nutfield covers and the sporting courtesies of the whole county, were ceasing to satisfy a man of his active habits. Moreover, London had not a few inducements for a man who was still a lion, and had not yet found his Capua.

But eight years' Indian service in remote frontier stations at the mouth of grim passes, and the rough and tumble vicissitudes of military service, do not sharpen a man's social perceptions, and Sancroft was almost unconscious of the movements of which he was the centre and cause, until, on the evening be-

fore he went to town to take up his appointment, his sister had an explanation which somewhat surprised him.

Dinner was over, and he was smoking a black Indian cheroot by the library fire, whilst his sister sat at the writing-table busy with the housekeeping accounts. Behind her arithmetic ran the uneasy knowledge that, since Gerald had been home, she had spent more money than her meagre allowance justified.

Her brother, hearing now the irritable scratch of her pen, now a faint sigh, was reminded, a little painfully, of his sister's thankless task and doubtful future.

There had been a big shooting party and a mighty bag at Nutfield, and the Colonel was pleasantly tired. It was half-past ten; Sir Rupert, who had trudged all day after the guns, though he had ceased to carry one, had already gone to his room.

Sancroft dropped *The Field* and glanced at his sister.

"Won't the accounts balance, Charlotte?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the sister, "but on the wrong side—against me."

Her brother took a free-and-easy view of money matters, and was still far from realising the dismal little struggle in domestic economy which she carried on from month to month, and from year to year. But he knew that she was ready to make any sacrifice



to maintain the link between the Sancrofts and Falconoke, and was not ungrateful. The encroaching mortgages were a nightmare to her, and she feared that her brother, absorbed in his profession, might, after his father's death, abandon all idea of living on an encumbered estate. Of this, if he returned to India, she perceived there were serious risks, and, as she leant over her housekeeping books, she was vividly conscious both of the threatening evil and the easy remedy. The whole position of the family would be altered if he would marry an heiress.

Sancroft rose from his chair and stood on the worn bear-skin rug with his back to the big wood fire, and looked thoughtfully at his sister. As she bent over her little pile of books he seemed to see all the accumulated worries of years reflected on her almost austere face. Two years older than himself, she had applied a far more useful shoulder to the creaking wheel of their family fortunes. Whilst his allegiance had been divided, Falconoke had been his sister's world, and he admired her for her indomitable courage.

"How heartily sick you must be, Charlotte, of your wretched accounts," said he. "I can remember you wrestling with them before I went out to India, and now, when I come back I find you still sitting in the same place busy with the same awful problem of making a pound do the work of twenty-five shillings."

"I am a little tired of it sometimes," said his sister, "still I'm accustomed to it. But I wonder what you will do when your turn comes?"

"I don't believe that I am capable of running Falconoke on an income one-third too small."

"Still, of course, you mean to live here, Gerald," she said anxiously, "when your Indian service is over?"

"I hope so," said he, a little doubtfully.

"Well, you know what you must do."

"What, Charlotte?"

"Marry an heiress."

Sancroft looked uncomfortable.

"I know," said he, "what you are thinking of, but I never thought you would be a matchmaker."

"I'm not, Gerald, but I'm not blind. Come! let us look things in the face. You must marry some day."

"Unless," said Sancroft, "I get knocked on the head first."

"It would be better to be knocked on the head *after*, if you marry the right woman," replied his sister. "Well! the right woman has chosen you. Whether you choose her or not rests with yourself. Everyone can see Miss Dodd is fond of you. My father has noticed it even. That is why he encourages her to come. Miss Dodd is charming in every way, and, when she marries, Sir Francis will give her £60,000, and at his death she'll get as much again."

Then if that frail little poet brother of hers, who makes himself so ridiculous with the pretty actress, Miss Westbrooke, were to die—and he suffers from asthma—she would come into an enormous fortune. The Dodds would give their eyes for the match, and beyond flinging herself at the Sultan's feet Sybil Dodd would do anything to win the Sultan's favour."

"Do you know, Charlotte," said the Colonel, who was now blushing, "that you make a man feel very foolish and conceited? Miss Dodd is all you say, and a good deal more, too, and I like her ever so much. If a man must marry he couldn't do better if she would have him; but I don't think that I've any right to go courting seriously just yet. Besides, you're mistaken—quite mistaken—about her. You are the most sensible woman in the world in some things, Charlotte, but on the question of your brother's marriage, my dear, you are rather a dangerous guide. Besides, you mustn't forget that I'm a soldier first, and I should not like to make any woman happy by giving her the privilege of following me up and down the Indian frontier, where my work must be done if I'm ever to do any more worth the doing."

"But a soldier needn't take his wife into all the holes and corners of Afridiland," said Miss Sancroft; "nor does a man necessarily become a poorer soldier because he happens to be married."

"He does, though, when he marries at my age," said the Colonel.

"Is that why you are trying to keep single, Gerald?"

"It's one of the reasons. When a man's wrapped up in a woman he's in a constant funk of being hit. I've seen it myself. He loses his nerve. Men who marry heiresses, unless they are major-generals, had better leave the army. However, I'm off to London to-morrow, so perhaps all these good people will find something else to talk about but me and Miss Dodd."

"You admit then, Gerald, that you have given some excuse for gossip?"

"Well, Charlotte, perhaps I have been a little careless. I'm an unpractised hand in these matters. Eight years in the jungle does make a man a little indiscreet, perhaps, and Miss Dodd is, as you say, charming and very pleasant to talk to."

"I am very fond of her, indeed!" said Miss San-croft, "and I'm sure you care for her a great deal more than you wish me to think."

Sancroft returned no answer, but his sister's hopes had rather been encouraged than depressed by the conversation.

"By the by, Charlotte," he said, when she was lighting a candle before starting on the walk through the dark winding corridors of the old house to her room in its remotest wing, "is there anything be-

tween Miss Westbrooke and our friend the poet?"

"Goodness knows, but youths of his temperament are always in love with someone, and he be-rhymes her in every magazine where the minor poet can enter."

"What an odd thing it would be," thought the Colonel, "if Althea married the poet."

He smiled, although the idea seemed as improbable as it was undesirable.

"Why are you laughing, Gerald?" his sister asked, standing at the heavy oak door.

"I was wondering what the Dodds would think of the marriage."

"They would end in believing it well assorted—genius on both sides. The father would be quite pompous about it after the first shock. But good-night, Gerald. Think over what I've told you in the solitude of the War Office. Good-night."

She gave him a pale cheek, on which he printed a careless, brotherly kiss, and left him to his reflections.

## CHAPTER XVI

TWO days after Sancroft arrived in London he called on Althea Westbrooke on the afternoon devoted to the reception of her acquaintances. Although he chose to regard his visit as one of simple courtesy, he was not unconscious that a sentiment considerably stronger prompted it. It was full of the attraction of novelty. The world in which Althea moved and shone was unknown to him ; but she had floated into it gracefully from a region where they had spent a brief moment of their lives in common. He looked back to the single sentimental episode of his career with some tenderness, finding in it charm enough to compensate both for its folly and the vengeful speed with which it had been brought to confusion. Unfinished romances are sometimes those which charm us most, and this one, which had left him with no regrets, resembled an impression gathered in a softer existence, before his metal had been tested or his sense of duty weighed. Whatever happened, Sancroft could never forget the girlish face, wet with tears, which he had kissed the day before he steamed out of the Solent, in the teeth of a black sou'-west gale.

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But if he had acted indiscreetly he was not sure that, under similar provocation, he was even now capable of greater wisdom. Morally the Colonel knew that he ought to be marching in the other direction; but a life of enforced austerity in all natures has moments of revolt, and he skirmished successfully with his conscience as men struck in a soft place will. He heard temptation knocking at the door and believed it was another message.

Thus a simple call which he, for his comfort, assumed to be an act of mere courtesy, depended on Althea for its moral danger. The followers of Ulysses were safe until the Sirens began to sing.

But his misgivings were far too shadowy to daunt the simple Colonel as he stood on Miss Westbrooke's doubtful threshold.

Althea's acquaintances were made in that ethereal circle of bright beings who believe that their intelligence and contempt of convention, in matters of art as in questions of morals, mark them out as a race apart. This little world believes it sees life whole because it beholds it through the flattering lens of its own self-appreciation. It was into such a clique as this that the unsuspecting Colonel stepped.

Althea received him very prettily. As a hostess he thought her charming. She introduced him to a famous actor, to a journalist noisy in print who honestly believed that his published approval had made her fortune, and to other lesser lights whose

names or portraits Sancroft recalled in papers read in hot Indian clubs, when the *punkah* was swinging and mail day an event.

If the key in which the conversation was pitched seemed strained and exaggerated, he supposed that must be because the imagination of clever people who wrote plays and books, or painted pictures, transcended his own. For him Art represented an idea of such vague import that he had no vocabulary to apply to it, but Althea's visitors all had an art of their own with which they seemed to live on the most familiar terms. Conversationally he felt incapable of pitting himself against such brilliant intellects, and so he sat quietly and heard with interest all who chose him for a listener, unaware of the fever of self-assertion which raged round him. His very modesty dazzled Althea, who felt a kindred joy to that of the astronomer when some new planet swims into his ken. The contrast between the voluble restlessness of her other visitors and Sancroft's soldierly quiet were delightful to a woman seeking a more virile and reticent type as a relief from all those who cultivate temperaments at the expense of resolute common sense.

Sancroft, at a hint from Althea, stayed on till the other callers had left, and then they spoke of Nutfield, of the Dodds, of the coming prominence of Sir Francis in politics ; hence, moving steadily towards her object, she gave faint hints of the nature of the gossip which had reached her ; " for," she said in excuse, " rumour



always flutters round names on which the light beats."

And Sancroft was slightly uneasy. "There's nothing," he thought, "like gossip to make a man look an ass." He was on the point of saying so, but said instead:

"Rumours are ridiculous things; but talking of rumours I rather expected to meet your friend the poet here to-day."

Althea was relieved at the reply and the suggestion conveyed.

"I don't think he has been here for more than a week," she answered, glancing at Mrs. Dormer for confirmation.

"A week last Friday," said Mrs. Dormer, who had reason for remembering.

"How accurate you are, Aunt Dormer," remarked Althea; "what should I do without you?"

"I hope Miss Westbrooke's memory is an easy one to assist," said the Colonel, smiling.

"Easier than it seems," said Mrs. Dormer.

Sancroft perceived the uses of this assumption of relationship and approved of it.

"Althea's ever so much more careful," he thought, "than she used to be. And quite right too."

"The duenna arrangement," of which he had heard Althea speak with amusement, pleased him. And so he was very respectful to Mrs. Dormer, whom

most of Althea's friends treated as a quantity with safety to be neglected. "The jealous watch-dog," as Ronald Dodd called her, might even have been propitiated had not Althea's manner excited suspicion. Until that afternoon, so far as Mrs. Dormer knew, Sancroft had been merely someone Althea had met at Nutfield. But the moment that lady saw him she perceived that he was a good deal more. Her idea of a colonel was a stout, middle-aged officer on half-pay, a type frequent sojournings at Bath, Brighton, and Cheltenham had made familiar. Moreover she only read newspapers for references to the Star over whose fortunes she watched, and had consequently associated nothing romantic with this colonel in particular. But now that she had sat opposite him, and compared him with the others, she sniffed danger in the air. She had never seen Althea, whom she read as an astronomer discerns the movements of the planets, so anxious to please any man before ; and so she was frightened.

"There's more in this one than in all the rest put together," she reflected, with reluctant admiration. "At any rate, he's a man."

And this was the highest compliment Mrs. Dormer could pay. Even if he had talked of "art for art's sake," she could have tolerated him ; but she had observed, not without a certain humorous sympathy, that the chatter of the circle which Althea swayed as the high priestess of Terpsichore bewildered him even

more than herself, for she had listened resentfully for nearly six years.

Might not such a man play havoc with the feelings of an emotional woman at the critical moment in her life? Certainly the duenna had cause for alarm.

And so, a prey to growing uneasiness, Mrs. Dormer listened until a careless allusion on the part of the Colonel "to that song which you sang years ago at Llandudno," stiffened her in her chair, and made her snap.

"I understood you met Althea for the first time at Sir Francis Dodd's, Colonel Sancroft."

"Oh, no," said he slowly, his colour rising under his tanned cheeks; "years ago, before I went to India."


Here the duenna, as jealous of her Star's past as of her present, discovered an incident of which she had never heard, and felt defrauded.

"But I never heard of you before," she exclaimed.

That this beautiful young woman, who had moved like a vestal through luxury, success, and temptation, and to whom she devoted boundless affection, should have kept this secret pinched her with disproportionate jealousy.

Sancroft looked for protection to Althea, who smiled mischievously.

"Aunt Dormer," she said, "never reads the papers. But although she is my duenna, in point of time at least you are an older friend than she is."



"I hope," said Mrs. Dormer rudely, "he may be as useful."

She was exasperated, and therefore inclined to fire her shots recklessly. Althea looked annoyed.

"I'm afraid," said Sancroft gravely, "that isn't likely; but 'pon my honour I can't see how Alth—Miss Westbrooke I mean—would have got on without you, with all these gallant poets, and clever professional people, and enthusiastic admirers buzzing round like—eh—insects. If ever a girl wanted an unselfish and resolute protectress, upon my word I believe Miss Westbrooke has needed one!"

He spoke with an air of simple conviction which would have pleased Mrs. Dormer had she retained her temper.

A little pause followed this tribute.

"When I met Miss Westbrooke," resumed the Colonel, "she was at school."

"What! the training college?" exclaimed Mrs. Dormer.

"Yes, a grim place under a mountain, with a fir-wood at the back. You remember, Miss Westbrooke?"

Althea smiled assent, and in their glance the duenna saw the light of a previous understanding.

Soon after this Sancroft left, and the two women faced one another. The elder, persuaded that she had a duty to discharge, determined to perform it at

all hazards, the younger full of annoyance at the other's aggressive intervention.

"Do you remember, Althea," Mrs. Dormer commenced, "that when we first decided to live together you told me to stop you if ever you threatened to make yourself a fool about a man?"

"I was younger then," said Althea, "and never realised how wise I was."

"Why did you never tell me about *this* Colonel Sancroft before?" resumed Mrs. Dormer, in her hardest voice.

The use of the pronoun and the stress on it exasperated Althea, and she retorted angrily:

"I never told you because it never concerned you."

"Was it because you were ashamed?"

"No; I will tell you now. I let Gerald Sancroft make love to me. It was because of him that I left the training college in disgrace. If he hadn't given me wings to fly with I should now be teaching little Welsh boys and girls to sing hymns, on a salary of thirty shillings a week! I loved him to make love to me—there!"

"Oh, Althea! Althea!" cried Mrs. Dormer, in the tones a woman applies to a lost sister, "I can't believe it. You are talking like a mad woman."

"I was never saner," answered Althea, with burning cheeks. "I must go to the theatre now; but before I do go I must beg you never to speak to me again as you have just spoken, and to understand that Colonel

Sancroft is one of the bravest and most honourable soldiers in the army."

Then Althea swept out of the room, with all the colour driven from her face. An hour later she was on the stage. The thought that Gerald Sancroft might be among the audience nerved her to do her best, and the applause restored some of the self-respect which she had lost with her temper.

When her performance was over, she found Mrs. Dormer as usual waiting with the brougham at the stage door. They drove back in silence. But before Althea went to her room she found the illustrated newspaper, which she treasured, giving an account of Sancroft's short but brilliant Indian career, and taking it to Mrs. Dormer, who sat alone dejectedly by the drawing-room fire, placed the journal in her hands.

"Read that," she said, "and then I think you will never refer to him as *this* Colonel Sancroft again."

"Oh, Althea!" said the other, on the verge of tears at their first real quarrel, "oh, Althea, I'm sure you have excuses enough for your folly."

The other made no answer, but went to her room and a sleepless pillow. For love had caught her unaware, and the wind of passion was rioting through her heart.

## CHAPTER XVII

WHEN the two women met on the following morning, both felt the ease of their daily intercourse destroyed. Their convenient garden of friendship, torn and beaten by the storm of dissension, no longer afforded comfort to either.

"If we can't help each other, why live together?" was Althea's first thought, but one she dared not utter. For Mrs. Dormer was her guest as well as her devoted if misguided friend.

On her side Mrs. Dormer believed Althea would not have the heart to sever a domestic partnership, useful to both, merely to gratify an unbecoming whim. The critical moment in her friend's life had come, and it was her duty to prevent an act of folly at every possible sacrifice of her own pride. But first a truce seemed necessary, so Mrs. Dormer waved a tiny white flag across the breakfast table.

"Althea?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I spoke with more warmth than I had a right to."

"No," said Althea, shrinking from the subject in cold blood, "no, I gave you the right to speak."

"Ah, but I abused the right a little. I'll be more careful in future. When one feels deeply one speaks strongly, you know. I daresay I'm a hard sort of woman, still you are the only creature in the world I care for. I have been your housekeeper for six years—"

"And for love, too," interrupted Althea. "I haven't forgotten."

"Yes, for love, dear, and we never quarrelled before."

"We used to agree well enough; but I was cross and excited yesterday, Aunt Dormer."

"And said things you didn't mean, Althea?"

The straw of comfort at which the poor lady clutched only made her hopes sink deeper.

"No, Aunt Dormer, no!" said Althea resolutely. "I want you to understand I'm tired of my tether in monotonous pastures. I have broken loose, as every woman must some day, if her soul isn't to wither."

Mrs. Dormer hated metaphors. She considered them "high-flown and barely honest," mere verbal excuses for eccentricity—or worse. Althea's flight confused her. She seemed to see an erring soul in the white sheet of repentance, whirling across a machine-driven photograph. A panic seized her.

"Althea! Althea!" she exclaimed. "Don't talk of withering, you who have led such a good life! There isn't another woman on the stage so re-



spected as you. There hasn't been even a whisper against you so far."

"That isn't because I'm different from other women in the profession, but because I never wanted any latitude," said Althea, trying to silence her mentor by weight of audacity.

Mrs. Dormer saw through the manoeuvre, and her manner chilled.

"May I ask you a question?" she said, with cold impressiveness.

"Certainly."

"Will you forgive me if I hurt your feelings?"

"I can't afford feelings. Trample on them as much as you like."

"Well," resumed the duenna, who fancied that she was probing her delicately, "I read the account of Colonel Sancroft last night. He is a very gallant officer, but wrapt up in his profession. His career must be in India for another ten years."

"Quite true."

"But you told me he had been a—a—well, a lover."

"Then I gave you a wrong impression. I knew he was never serious."

"Althea! where is your pride?"

"Buried without even a tombstone!"

"Do you expect him to marry you?"

"No."

"Then what do you expect?"

"Nothing! absolutely nothing! It may be one of those rare cases in which man disposes—you know."

"But you won't be mad enough to encourage a second scandal worse than the first? If you are afraid of becoming attached to the man, keep out of his way. Don't see him. Escape the danger like a good woman."

"No, I'll face it like a brave one. I'm going to meet it even now at the ice skating-rink." Althea displayed a letter in a bold handwriting. "He has begged me very prettily to come. The spell is beginning to work! This is not a devil to be driven out by fasting and prayer, Aunt Dormer, but a fiend beyond the range of your experience. I'm an explorer in a new country. I want to see the promised land beyond the mountain."

"I can tell you what you will find there," said Mrs. Dormer sternly—"disaster!"

"Then it shall fall on my head. I'll defy it. But we are beginning to talk nonsense, and I must go and dress. I shall not be back, as I am to have the honour of lunching with the Colonel. But there is one thing I want to say, so please listen to me, Aunt Dormer. This isn't a pretty thing to talk about, and I don't mean to discuss it again unless you are bent on seriously quarrelling with me. Partners who can't get on, you know, dissolve partnership."

The thrust made Mrs. Dormer cold.

"Do you want me to leave you then, Althea?"

"No, I should be very sorry if you did, for I like you very much. There, I kiss you as a sign of good fellowship! Still, you must understand that I allow no one to—well, clip my wings."

Then Althea kissed the troubled wrinkles about Mrs. Dormer's dismal forehead, and left the room with a resolute face and the sense of victory.

An hour later she was skating with the Colonel, who had long ago in Canada mastered the mysteries of the art. In a white cloth dress trimmed with ermine, and a white ermine hat, she was the most graceful and beautiful woman in the rink.

Mrs. Dormer, as good women often will, had committed the crowning blunder. She had assumed that Althea was to grovel at the Sultan's feet, forgetting the Sultan's own danger from the woven spells of his victim.

## CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN a woman of Althea Westbrooke's splendid gifts and daring temperament desires at all hazards to win as much of a man's love as it is possible for him to give, unless she begrudge burnt offerings, her success is nearly certain. Only the saints in legends mutiny against such delicious tyranny. In history, the bravest fall ; from Mark Antony and Cæsar you may see the heroes toppling down the world's record, whenever beauty has been daring and passion strong. Only in love there must be no thrift, and Althea, glowing within the magic circle for the first time, was as generous as the stream of her own untainted life.

But when men and women are caught up in the sweep of their emotions, they seem to lose the guidance of their own steps. When the campaign began Althea scarcely knew that she had an object. She followed a white light with a beating heart, and the common objects on her path became transformed under its radiance. Long immunity in a sensuous atmosphere made the wound desperate and deep. Yet as a combatant in love's wars her skill, in spite of her innocence, was great, and Sancroft found himself drifting into her society as naturally as a fallen

leaf finds the centre of the stream. They skated together, met at a dozen houses, eager for both as guests, till the whisper reached the stage door and thence spread to Sybil at Nutfield, who shuddered through the night watches in miserable jealousy, and to her brother in his solitary rooms consuming his jealous heart with sonnets.

But Sancroft, inexperienced in the devious ways of a woman's impulses, was slow to understand that he might resume their common story at the last parting of their ways. An innocent passion which has had no sequel is easily renewable by the causes originally creating it. First Althea appealed to the sense of comradeship strong within him. Sancroft, at official work in London, alone in Jeremy Street chambers, was in a new world—a world full of strangers, anxious to use him as an evening's social decoration. But as a lion the young Colonel roared indifferently. He was too taciturn and grave, especially when bewildered by gushing hostesses all vapid chatter and flustered tact. The more winning gifts of his simple temperament, never near the surface, were rarely discovered by strangers. Of small talk his share was scanty; awkward silences, which women find irksome and mistake for dullness, would swallow him up. A man who has spent the sternest years of his youth amid native soldiery in grim Afghan valleys does not learn the grimaces of the moment instinctively. In the eight years of his foreign service, smartness, as a

pose, had been invented, and the surface bubbles perplexed him. These people seemed to him to have no grip of life — only affectations and flimsy make-believes. Where he saw the Empire they beheld Bond Street and Piccadilly. Yet they thought him provincial.

Hitherto since his return home, only Sybil Dodd had plunged deep enough into his sympathies to make his amiable qualities glow in genial unconsciousness. But Althea, plunging deeper still, melted the severity of his eyes till they softened into a smile which coiled round her heart. It was his very deficiency in qualities usually regarded as the current coin of courtship that drew her most towards him. Sancroft had never consciously made an epigram in his life, but he presented a magnificent foil to the nimble-witted young gentlemen who hunt paradoxes, and mistake flippancy for intellectual daring.

Meanwhile Mrs. Dormer watched with growing uneasiness an intimacy beyond her power to control. She feared to make another protest lest Althea should banish her from her councils. Once, in Sancroft's presence, she endeavoured to reopen the discussion, by referring to herself as a dethroned duenna ; but he had not understood, and Althea had ignored her meaning. She still accompanied Althea home from the theatre every evening, and the austerity of voice and manner, whenever the Colonel's name was mentioned, was a constant reproach. But he, seeing

nothing, thought Mrs. Dormer "exactly the right sort of lady to look after a prima donna."

"She is much more anxious about my reputation than I am myself," said Althea.

"And indeed she's quite right!" said the Colonel innocently.

He knew Althea's friends had nicknamed Mrs. Dormer "the watch dog," but his surprise would have been great had he known she was baying at him.

Following the pleasant, sloping path which Althea was preparing for him, he was unconscious the world was busy coupling their names.

It chanced that Sancroft had expressed a wish to be introduced to a certain eminent actor and his wife, and one Sunday evening Althea invited them to meet "her Colonel," as he was now meaningly called in her circle.

She chose an evening when Mrs. Dormer was absent on a brief visit to her sister, the mistress of a flourishing girls' school at Bath, and on the Saturday before the dinner the aggrieved lady departed, unaware of the festival her presence would have blighted.

But dinners, even the smallest and most innocent, are exposed to the winds of chance, and Althea's did not escape. The day was frosty and bright, and she had driven to Richmond; the crisp air, the bare trees, the withered bracken under the pale wintry sky, had

calmed her fever. It was pleasant to sit alone in the quiet drawing-room, free from Aunt Dormer's inquisitorial eye. But the bell rung and the servant brought a letter. Influenza had suddenly claimed Althea's other guests.

"We have both temperatures," wrote the lady, "but although Wyllie thinks he is very ill, I am quite as bad. It's impossible to come."

It was too late to put the Colonel off; too late to find other guests—even had she desired it. There was nothing to be done. The dinner must take place—she smiled oddly at the prospect—and the proprieties run their own risks.

How lucky Aunt Dormer wasn't there! Her disapproving frown would have poisoned the meats.

Then Althea went to dress. She chose a gown—one Mrs. Dormer would have considered most unsuitable—of rose pink silk with shoulder straps of black velvet. Her maid thought it lovely, but its beauty was not more emphatic than its daring.

When Sancroft, five minutes late, arrived, he first glanced round the room, surprised to see it empty, and then looked inquiringly at Althea, standing in her rose-pink skirts, with the fire-glow dancing in her jewels. Her beauty seemed to leap out of the glow as from an ambush. He had already seen her a dozen times on the stage, but he thought her lovelier now, smiling on him from the snowy bear-skin rug with welcome in her eyes.



## The Heart of the Dancer

"What a hostess," he thought, "what a hostess!"

"Prepare," she said, "for a disappointment. I have lost my other guests."

She handed him the letter, which he read.

"Influenza!" he said. "If it's like what I've seen it in India among the natives I'm sorry for them."

"I'm afraid you must put up with me," said Althea. "For Aunt Dormer has gone to her sister's at Bath, and there wasn't time to get anyone else to meet you. In fact, it's a chapter of accidents. To complete the tragedy, I should not be surprised if there were no dinner."

Whilst she spoke she watched her guest closely, suspecting by the faint flicker of his grave eyes that he was conscious of the shadowy impropriety lurking in the situation, which she set to work to dispel. Her success was complete. In five minutes she had soothed him to a point beyond the reach of embarrassment. Even when dinner was announced, and she took his arm, as an old and trusting friend might take it, in mock ceremony, to cross the hall to the dining-room, uneasiness could not touch them. They sat at the faultlessly-arranged round table, separated by a great bowl of dark red roses and the dazzling sweep of the silver and snowy cloth, with all the ease bred of natural sympathy.

"A woman like this," he reflected, "is a law to herself."

The Althea who danced and sang before mighty

audiences, the Althea to whom he had once made love, and whose beauty and charm now clouded his judgment, seemed in her own house a gentle and gracious power, who touched the well-adjusted wheels of reticent luxury in his honour so softly that even the sense of shared domesticity could not ruffle his moral or material ease. And so he forgot what it had been better for him to remember, and talked and laughed with his Circean hostess with an abandonment of constraint equalling her own.

All his life Sancroft remembered that evening. He was a man who rarely spoke of himself; pride in his profession and his soldierly ambition were too deeply rooted for vain display, but now experience seemed to unfold itself naturally. She made him describe the chief features of the last campaign—her own vivid questions bringing out the picturesque and tragic flashes, the horrors of death amid frost and snow, the well-ordered retreat through icy torrents in darkness, the want of food, the want of sleep, the bullets cutting the black cold of the night, and then the long agony in the beleaguered hill fort. The trampled, blood-stained snows of the remote frontier outpost which he had held with his fever-stricken, half-starved, and half-frozen native troops, became in Althea's mind the scene of a most magnificent drama.

"How great the difference," she thought, "between his stage and mine!"

## The Heart of the Dancer

After dinner they went to the drawing-room where, at his request, Althea sat at the piano straying carelessly through fragments of song until finally she found the little pathetic Welsh air which she associated with their first meeting, and sang it with extreme tenderness. The ballad conveyed its message.

"How much has happened since I last heard you sing that!" said he.

"Yes, you have become a famous soldier," she answered, turning a faintly smiling face towards him, whilst her fingers still wandered over the chords.

She guessed his desire to say something apologetic about the past, and the song was intended to encourage his utterance.

"Ah! but you have become a much more famous singer," he returned.

"Thanks to you!"

"To me?"

"Yes. If there hadn't been, well—a row at the college, I should never have had courage to go on the stage. The jump was rather a long one."

"That's the first time you have reproached me," said he uneasily.

"It was *not* a reproach."

"It's my conscience, then."

"I have no control over that," she said, quietly.

"I know you must have a poor opinion of me. Still there were a few excuses for my conduct, if you could only see them."

"See them? Of course I do."

Then as an answer she sang—

*"Beau chevalier qui partez pour la guerre,  
Qu'allez vous faire  
Si loin d'ici?  
Voyez-vous pas que la nuit est profonde,  
Et que le monde  
N'est que souci?"*

Here she stopped and smiled at him again.

"I understand quite well what you mean," said he.

"Do you? Hear the second verse before you are quite sure :—

*"Vous qui croyez qu'une amour délaissée  
De la pensée  
S'enfuit ainsi,  
Hélas ! hélas ! chercheurs de renommée  
Votre fumée  
S'envole ainsi."*

When she ended she rose from the piano and approached him.

"There!" she said. "I have given you enough music for one night."

"It is a lovely song," he said, "but I'm less certain now that I quite understand. It's a little late, too, to say I'm sorry for being foolish."

"If we were foolish, at least we were rather happy," said Althea softly.

He thought her eyes looked as they had looked in the firwood.

But the little clock striking half-past ten reminded Sancroft of the proprieties ; she saw by his glance that he meant to go, and why.

"We have been 'summoning up the dead past,'" she added, "as though we were characters in a melodrama. But I see you are going. I'm afraid you have had a dull evening."

"A dull evening!" he repeated. "A lovely evening. You have been very good. And I'll forgive you even for laughing at me. But when young ladies sing ballads to old soldiers, old soldiers get sentimental, you know. Good-night," he said, holding her hand more affectionately than he was conscious of. "I shall never forget the evening I dined with the Tenth Muse!"

Then he left the room, but she felt he was much nearer to her than when he entered it.

## CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Mrs. Dormer returned on Monday afternoon she opened the door with her key and marched into the drawing-room, where Althea's maid was putting a bouquet of roses into a Venetian glass bowl.

Mrs. Dormer was in a bad temper, and regretted her visit to Bath.

"Who knows what has been going on here without me?" she wondered.

The maid knew, and meant to enlighten her by way of a punishment.

"And pray what are you doing, Anne?" Mrs. Dormer asked, with suppressed peevishness. She prided herself on standing no nonsense, and was loved proportionately by Althea's servants in consequence.

The maid continued to arrange the flowers whilst she gave her explanation with outward respect but secret malice.

The flowers had just been brought by a special messenger, and Anne had been told ("by Miss Althea, ma'am") whenever fresh flowers arrived to put them in water *at once*.

The card which had been attached to the flowers was lying on the table. Mrs. Dormer seized it and read, "Lt-Colonel Sancroft." Then she dropped it angrily.

"Where is Miss Westbrooke?" she asked.

"At rehearsal, I think, ma'am."

"Did she dine at home last night?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. Colonel Sancroft dined here."

Anne had carefully calculated the effect of this piece of intelligence. A well-trained servant who keeps eyes and ears open can shoot the adroitest shafts of annoyance at her employers from the safest ambush, and Mrs. Dormer was Anne's favourite target.

"They are conspiring together to deceive me!" she thought. "Conspiring! how abominable."

"There!" said Anne, giving the finishing touches to the flowers. "Do you think that will do, or would Miss Althea prefer the blue china vase?"

"That will do," growled Mrs. Dormer. Then she added, "You are sure no one else dined here last night, Anne?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. I thought some others were expected, because Miss Althea wore the rose pink silk with black velvet shoulder straps."

"Oh!" groaned Mrs. Dormer inwardly, "that dress!"

"But I asked Morgan, ma'am," resumed Anne, "and she told me Miss Althea told her to take a leaf

out of the table, and to lay for two. It was quite a long dinner, though."

"Good heavens, I can see the scandal growing!" thought Mrs. Dormer.

Then she turned her back on the servant, who left the room to talk it over with the cook and the parlour-maid, convinced that "something was up."

"Yes, Morgan," said Anne, "if *she* takes it on herself to interfere, she'll make the place too hot for her and have to go."

"Good thing, too!" said the parlour-maid. "As for me, I can't think why Miss Althea puts up with her."

Meanwhile, the subject of the conversation, sitting in the drawing-room in troubled thought, suddenly came to a daring resolution.

It was useless to appeal to Althea; but suppose she appealed to the man? A brave soldier is probably also a chivalrous gentleman. Moreover, Mrs. Dormer liked the look of him, an opinion which, when expanded to its full meaning, was a mighty compliment to the man of whom it was held.

She took up the card and inspected it carefully. In the right side corner was written "Falconoke," in the left "Army and Navy Club." On the back she discovered the following inscription:—

*J'en vais pleurer, moi qui me laissais dire  
Que mon sourire  
Était si doux."*



Beneath was written in English : " But you omitted the last verse."

Mrs. Dormer was unacquainted with De Musset's poems, but she knew enough French to construe the lines for which she could give no intelligent application.

What on earth could a colonel in the British army have to cry about? What did Althea mean by telling him his " smile was so sweet"? What was the last verse which Althea had omitted? The whole thing seemed as ridiculous as the motto in a Christmas cracker, except that behind it were suggestions of tragic import to a duenna determined to do her duty.

Mrs. Dormer, as a woman of action, decided that something must be done. Morally she felt herself in a position of authority over Althea, and determined to exercise her right.

She looked at Sancroft's card for his address, but only his club was given. It was useless to call there. She believed it was in Jermyn Street, but did not know the number. Probably Althea's maid would know.

Mrs. Dormer rang the bell, which Morgan answered.

" Tell Anne I wish to speak to her," said Mrs. Dormer.

Morgan withdrew, and said to Anne :

" *She's* in a vile temper, and wants you.

Anne laughed mischievously, and replied :

" *She* shall have something to be cross about before I've done with her."

" Anne ! " said Mrs. Dormer when the maid appeared, " can you tell me Colonel Sancroft's number in Jermyn Street ? "

Anne appeared to reflect.

" I'm not quite sure, ma'am ; but I think Miss Althea might know."

Mrs. Dormer frowned.

Then, after a pause, Anne added :

" I think it must be 397. I remember taking a letter there for Miss Althea. Yes, it's 397, Jermyn Street Chambers, ma'am, I'm sure."

" Three — nine — seven," repeated Mrs. Dormer. " H'm—thank you."

Anne withdrew, winking, as it were, to herself. Mrs. Dormer rose, glanced in the mirror, readjusted her severe, featherless hat, pulled her black cloth coat down from the collar, and, marching downstairs, ordered the hall porter to whistle a passing hansom, and drove across St. James's Park on her errand.

It was, she thought, easier after all to deal with a man.

A servant, with old soldier written all over him, opened the door, admitted that the Colonel was at home, took Mrs. Dormer's card, and showed her into a meagrely-furnished apartment, of which the most striking ornament was a large photograph of Althea in whirling skirts as " Voltigia."

"An ill-omened thing," thought Mrs. Dormer, frowning at the portrait, "and one of the last, too."

Sancroft, who was busy in the adjoining room with papers brought from the War Office, appeared almost immediately. He seemed to her fresh from his work, and with a look of mental vigour on his handsome, face, in a more masterful mood than when she had last seen him in Althea's drawing-room. But she called all her faculties to attention, and began firmly:

"No doubt you are surprised to see me, Colonel Sancroft."

"Surprised? Oh, no," said he, "pleased rather. Let me draw your chair nearer the fire."

"No, thank you. I'm quite comfortable. The fact is, I have come to talk to you about Althea."

"Indeed," said he, beginning to doubt that she merely came as a harmless messenger in a subordinate position.

"I am," Mrs. Dormer continued, "very much worried about Althea."

"She isn't ill, surely?"

"She isn't well, Colonel Sancroft!"

"I dined with her last night; she was perfectly well then."

"In health of body, yes, Colonel Sancroft, but not . . . not in health of mind. She is changed, greatly changed, and I, who have lived with her in the closest intimacy for six years, have been rendered extremely anxious."

"You surprise and perplex me very much," said the Colonel uneasily.

"I have come to you," continued Mrs. Dormer, like a judge summing up in a criminal case, "because you are the only person who can help me; and I am claiming your help because I know you will act like a gentleman."

"The question of my conduct is scarcely one which I care to discuss," said Sancroft haughtily. "But when you assume that I would do anything in my power for Miss Westbrooke you are quite right. But I never knew a young lady less in need of help from any one."

"That," said Mrs. Dormer, "is a point on which it is my duty to enlighten you. You were once, Colonel Sancroft, on more than friendly terms with Althea Westbrooke."

Then the light burst in on him, and he coloured deeply.

"This is a question which I would rather not discuss with you, unless you can assure me that you have Miss Westbrooke's sanction to open it," said he.

"What has happened is finished and done with," she answered. "I don't want to know anything about it. It is the future I'm thinking of; and I will not stand by and see Althea Westbrooke make a fool of herself."

Sancroft looked at her in silence for a moment before he answered.

"I'm not sure," he said, "that I quite understand you, unless you mean that Miss Westbrooke's friendship with me is compromising to her character."

"That's exactly what I do mean," said Mrs. Dormer, with energy. "There is a critical moment in the life of every woman when she is capable of any folly. As the ridiculous phrase goes, Althea fancies herself in love with you, and since marriage, so far as I can see, is out of the question between you"—here she waited for a reply, but since none was forthcoming, resumed—"the only thing for you to do is to protect her against herself. You have a distinguished name in your profession, and so has she in hers, but if things go on as they are going on, well, the reputation of both of you will suffer. If you are really Althea's friend you will keep out of her way, and make her understand that she is committing a great mistake."

When she had finished, Mrs. Dormer was surprised at the patience with which he had taken her scolding.

"I respect your motive," said he, "but I think you are exaggerating the seriousness of the matter. But if you think Miss Westbrooke is acting indiscreetly, would it not be better to—eh—warn her?"

"I have," said Mrs. Dormer, "and she told me to mind my own business."

"But what do you want me to do?"

"Don't skate with her, dance with, dine with her, do not send her bouquets with ambiguous quotations

from the French attached to them ; make her and the world understand that there is nothing whatever between you."

Sancroft frowned.

"You are asking more than courtesy will permit me to perform. However, I will be careful not to compromise Miss Westbrooke. But the subject is one of extreme delicacy ; I would rather say no more about it. May I ring for some tea for you ?"

"No tea, thank you," said Mrs. Dormer, feeling that she had discharged a difficult errand with considerable success.

She rose from her chair and looked closely at Sancroft, whose face, now under complete control, concealed whatever he thought or felt.

At the end of the silence, measuring their glance, it occurred to Mrs. Dormer that some sort of apology was at least politic.

"If, Colonel Sancroft," she resumed unflinchingly, "you think that I've said anything I ought not to have said, I hope you will overlook it. My excuse is, that I'm the nearest thing to a mother of which Althea can boast. Now, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Dormer."

Then she left the room.

"An awful woman," he thought ; "but a plucky one. Poor Althea !"

He was sorry, too, for himself. But since no man ever felt anything but pleasure even at the suspicion

that a beautiful woman loved him, distress of mind was very far from being the predominating influence of the mood in which the interview plunged him.

## CHAPTER XX

ALTHEA returned from rehearsal expecting a sour greeting. In her not entirely guiltless fancy she heard the reproachful voice :—

“Althea!” it said sternly, “I was surprised that you had guests, or rather *a* guest, last night.”

But the accusing voice was elsewhere. The balmy greeting of Sancroft’s flowers and playful message welcomed her instead. The terrors which Mrs. Dormer embodied melted into thin air as the petals of the roses brushed her face.

Evidently he had hunted her song to its source in de Musset’s poems. The luminous clouds of love and romance were gathering round her head. The god was smiling on the mountain nymph; if all the shepherd dogs of the region bayed in wrath, need she care?

But the pleasant reverie was short. Althea carried the flowers to the pretty boudoir adjoining her room and placed them on a small table, near a youthful portrait of Sancroft in uniform, a relic of their first meeting. Then she rang the bell and Anne entered bent on mischief.



"Any letters for me, Anne?" said Althea, vaguely hoping for some other agreeable surprise.

"Only the flowers, miss; a special messenger brought them just before Mrs. Dormer returned. I asked her whether I should put them in the Venetian bowl or the blue china vase."

"Where is Mrs. Dormer?"

"I don't know, ma'am. She asked me for Colonel Sancroft's address, and when I told her she went out."

"Did she say where she was going?" asked Althea, still scarcely taking the hint.

"No, ma'am. But by the way she repeated the Colonel's number—*three—nine—seven*—I somehow fancied she was going to see him."

The truth was that Anne had asked the hall porter whether he had heard the address which Mrs. Dormer gave the cabman, and he had said "Jermyn Street Chambers."

Anne's hint could no longer be misunderstood. A wave of anger, shame, and apprehension swept over Althea. She remembered how Mrs. Dormer had attacked Ronald Dodd, but scarcely believed that she would dare to ask Sancroft his intentions. What a fate for her romance!

There was much method in Anne's mischief. If she could sufficiently embroil her two mistresses, she hoped to rid herself of the heavier yoke.

"Mrs. Dormer," she said, "seemed surprised there

was company last night. She asked who it was, whether you had a leaf taken out of the table, and what you wore. When I told her the rose-pink silk, with black velvet shoulder-straps, she seemed quite surprised, and—”

But her mistress, who had heard more than enough, interrupted her peremptorily.

“Give me my fur cloak!”

Then Althea removed her walking jacket, changed her hat, flung on the thick cloak, and hurried off, leaving Anne to impart her triumph to the parlour-maid.

“Ah, there’ll be a pretty row when they do meet!” she observed. “What I say is that she has every right to make up to the Colonel. It don’t concern that interfering Mrs. Dormer one little bit.”

With this view the parlour-maid, who also had a weakness for soldiers, glancing critically over her teacup, agreed.

Meanwhile, the hall-porter, having confirmed her fears, Althea went her way, reckless of consequences, but, hurry as she would, there was no escape from the gadfly created to sting her. She had been made ridiculous in the eyes of the man she loved—the most unpardonable outrage on a woman’s vanity.

“How dare she!—how dare she!” she cried inwardly, as she walked away from the great block of buildings. “She has humiliated me for ever!”

At the end of the street she took a cab and drove

to Jermyn Street. Passing St. James's Palace she saw Mrs. Dormer shouldering her way by the red-coated sentries, her eyes fixed on the pavement. The sight of her aroused the passionate desire to undo what she believed the other had done, and Althea rushed on her fate as blindly as a Moslem fanatic flings himself on unbelieving bayonets, to die in an ecstasy of faith and ferocity.

Sancroft was sitting opposite the chair which Mrs. Dormer had left vacant when Althea, with pale cheeks and flaming eyes, entered unannounced.

"What has that woman been telling you?" she commenced.

"Nothing we need talk about," he replied, rising to meet her.

"She has made me look a feeble, sentimental fool in your eyes," continued Althea, flooding the narrow room with excitement.

"No, no, Althea," he said gently, placing his hand softly on the back of hers, "nothing any one can say can alter my feeling for you. Come, sit down. We'll talk the matter over quietly, like old friends."

"Did she tell you that you mustn't see me again?"

"She wishes me not to give people an excuse for gossiping—that's all."

"All! Why, it's intolerable And what did you say?"

"I, Althea? I said I would do nothing to—well, to compromise you."

The word offended him. He found it because Mrs. Dormer had used it. The moment was now full of terrors. The man she loved seemed sinking below the verge of her horizon, leaving it in blank darkness. The sense of disproportion in their exchange appeared terrible. She gave everything; he—a promise not to compromise her!

"You promised willingly enough!" Althea exclaimed, with forlorn bitterness. "You needed no persuasion. I can imagine all the dreadful things she said. 'Don't make a fool of poor Althea, Colonel Sancroft! She is most excitable—a quite undisciplined young woman, although good at heart'"—here she mimicked Mrs. Dormer's voice. "Oh, it's enough to make one die in the dark of shame. Women have poisoned themselves for less."

"You are unfair to Mrs. Dormer," said Sancroft soothingly. "She interfered from a sense of duty—a mistaken sense, no doubt, but her intentions were good."

"Good intentions have been an excuse for the worst outrages since the world began. I'll be their victim no longer! After this she and I can't possibly live together."

"What! will you send her away?"

"Yes."

"And live alone?"

"Yes, and live alone—free from all interference. I have paid court to society long enough."

## The Heart of the Dancer

Sancroft shook his head in gentle expostulation.

"I'll forget every word Mrs. Dormer said," he replied, "if you will look happy again."

What if this woman really loved him? The thought filled him with joy, whilst her beauty, pathetic in its abandonment, shattered his resolutions into the hesitating fragments of a broken purpose.

"There! there!" he added, as one speaks to a sensitive child, "don't worry about it. It must be easy for the Tenth Muse to be happy."

"Happy!" she echoed—"happy!"

He had taken both her hands and held them clasped. The deceptive restfulness of the contact calmed her. Outside the melancholy twilight was thickening to darkness, but within the narrow room firelight and shadow made a sort of luminous peace. To Althea the moment, coloured by the memories of their first rapturous meetings, seemed stolen from some period of bliss spent in a previous existence. Wonderment had departed, and fear's shadow, the embarrassment of sex.

The spell which encompassed both was broken by the step of the servant, who entered with a diffidence awakening their secret sense of shame.

The cabman wished to know whether he was to wait.

"I forgot to pay him," said Althea, feeling for her purse.

"Pay him—tell him to go; bring a lamp and some tea," said Sancroft.

It seemed right that he should decide for her. Then, at his request, she removed her heavy cloak and sat in the armchair. Pride had come to quarrel, but remained meekly to be comforted. How weak she was! But wrath and resentment had fled, and her thoughts were losing their clearness of outline. The world, in which she lived and danced and sang in a flood of coloured light before great audiences merged in applausive darkness, seemed far away. Silence, languid with strange fancies, now seemed most fitting, but across it the deeper human senses were calling like whispers of Nature in still, summer nights.

"Tired, Althea?" he said softly, standing over her.

"Yes."

"Poor Althea!"

If he knew her secret, little she cared. Convention had become a shadow on the wall of life; human praise or blame were as the crackling of dry leaves in burnt-out autumn fires.

It seemed strange that the ordinary course of existence went on as though she had not stepped beyond its circle. The man brought the lamp, a maid followed, casting curious eyes on Althea, and bearing a japanned tray and a battered silver teapot, a property of the rooms produced in honour of lady visitors. But these movements were shadows outside her dream. The emotions which had lately torn and rent her had left a sense of numbness behind.

## The Heart of the Dancer

"This excitement isn't good for you," said San-croft, bringing her a cup of tea. "You look very tired."

"I was just back from rehearsal when I found out what she had done."

"Yes, yes," said he quickly; "but rest now, don't talk—don't even think."

"I feel," she said, turning her doubtful eyes to him, "that I never want to think again—only to sit down and see things float by. But you can't understand that."

"It must be like convalescence after an illness," he answered, recalling an Indian experience and a bed of sickness.

Then the dreamy silence fell on the room again. For what could either say? There was, he felt, something strangely pathetic in the homage of this beautiful woman, which was plunging him into a non-moral world where the tree of duty grows not, where the snake is hidden under a million roses, and where other forms than those of human reason rule, and rule as tyrants. But at last Althea, feeling the spell must be broken, rose and said:

"I must go."

"Where?"

"Home—to fight her."

"It isn't worth a quarrel."

She moved slowly towards her cloak, flung on the austere, horsehair sofa, conscious of the eyes—no

longer grave—bent on her with a wavering purpose.

“Good-bye—Gerald,” she said, turning towards him and lingering softly on his name.

“But is it ‘good-bye’?” he asked, speaking slowly too.

Then the cloak slipped from her shoulders, a throbbing impulse within drove her forward, and as his head stooped she caught him to her breast and kissed him with all her soul.

That evening, for the first time, Colonel Sancroft drove Althea to the theatre, whilst the victim of her own stratagem dined alone.



## CHAPTER XXI

AT the usual hour Mrs. Dormer, blown upon by the winds of coming disaster, drove in Althea's brougham to the stage door. To her relief Althea appeared, her face nearly concealed by the fur cloak. Stepping in swiftly, she sat at her side, as she had sat a hundred times before; but this time there sat between them a sense of mistrust and defiance which oppressed the elder woman by its weight.

Mrs. Dormer felt that her authority had been scouted, her affection treated with ingratitude. This she could have pardoned; but that the maidenly reserve which had clung to Althea's conduct like a delicate and chaste aroma should have been sacrificed, filled her with the deepest disappointment. She had made an ideal for Althea, but at the first serious trial it fell into acrid dust.

They drove through the confused cross lights of the speeding night traffic for several minutes in a silence which both feared to break, but when they were descending from Trafalgar Square to Westminster, and the riot of wheels and hoofs was passed, Mrs. Dormer's outraged authority burst forth.

"Althea," she said sternly, "tell me where you have been."

"I have been," replied Althea, "where you have driven me. I had to undo what you had done, and to apologise to Colonel Sancroft for your interference. Afterwards I dined with him, and then he saw me to the stage door. I don't think I need tell you any more."

"You mean that you flung yourself at this man's head, and tempted him to make love to you!"

"I mean to say that I forbid you to discuss my conduct."

But the carriage, stopping at their door, cut short their quarrel. A moment more and they had crossed their common threshold. Each by the light in the hall read the anger and pain in the other's face.

Althea's maid followed them to the dining-room, where were refreshments on the sideboard, and the welcome warmth of a bright fire.

"Give me some soda-water, please, Anne," said Althea.

Her throat seemed parched with dust and fever, and beyond that was an inner thirst of shame that no water could ever quench.

"Now you can go to bed, Anne."

Passing the parlour-maid's room, Anne whispered:

"Morgan, they'll have it out to-night. Miss Althea's in a state of nerves, and the other one's white with rage."

"Tell me about it in the morning," murmured the sleepy maid; "it'll keep."

When she heard the door of the servant's room shut Mrs. Dormer turned to Althea, who had flung herself in an arm-chair with her face from the light, and said:

"So you refuse me any explanation, Althea?"

"Yes."

"Of course, then, it is impossible for us to go on living together. I should only be in your way."

Mrs. Dormer waited for an answer, but none came, so she resumed:

"Even if you wanted me to after this it would be impossible."

"Perfectly impossible," echoed Althea, the hardness of her voice measuring the depth of the change.

"Shall I tell you why, Althea?"

Again there was no answer.

"It is because I can't stand by and see you sacrifice the best side of your character for a man who you know will never marry you!"

Then Althea rose to her feet, her face white, and her eyes unnaturally bright within the dark circle of fatigue that framed them.

"Give me no more reasons," she said. "I won't hear them. One side of the world is always proud of its moral superiority over the other—the baser side. Let us dissolve partnership as soon as possible. I will tolerate neither blame nor criticism, and refuse

from to-night to discuss this matter again. You are my guest, and this place is at your disposal so long as you choose to remain."

"In that case," said Mrs. Dormer, "I shall leave to-morrow."

"As you please," said Althea slowly, rising and moving to the door with tightly closed lips and erect head.

When she was alone in her room she flung herself on her bed, where, with her face in the pillow to stifle her sobs, she wept like a passionate child.

But Mrs. Dormer, having turned out the lights automatically, went to her room, where, arrayed in a flannel dressing-gown, she commenced to pack a portmanteau with the grim persistency that defies sorrow.

"And how I loved the girl," she thought when her task was done. Then, as she brushed her iron-grey locks before the mirror, she recalled Althea's endearing ways—her clear laugh, her quaint smile, her kindness of heart, and all the pleasant memories they had shared together, until she was almost tempted to seek the other's room to weep her grief out on her shoulder, like a mother whose love is stronger than her power to chide. But the conviction that Althea desired to be rid of her held her back. She had lost something that had kept her affections warm, and lay awake sorrowfully far into the night.

The following morning, her heart hardened by the

chill wintry light, Mrs. Dormer completed the preparations for her departure without forgetting a detail. The servants, with extreme alacrity, brought her trunks from the box-room, and by half-past nine they were locked, strapped, and labelled, "Dormer, passenger to Bath."

"Miss Althea had had some tea at eight o'clock," said her maid, "and was now asleep, quite worn out."

"Let her sleep," said Mrs. Dormer, preparing to breakfast alone.

It was a dismal meal, that last breakfast. The morning was frosty and clear, the gulls were flying over the river in the pale blue air. The wintry sunshine flooded the pleasant room, recalling a hundred similar mornings when there was no weight of disappointment or resentment, or black cloud of quarrel frowning from yesterday on to-morrow.

After breakfast Mrs. Dormer wrote the letters which she considered her change of plans required. By the time her correspondence was finished she hoped Althea might appear; but the door remained sullenly closed. Evidently Althea, fearing another scene, was avoiding her. "She needn't be afraid," thought the dethroned duenna, "I've done! After this, if I'm wanted I must be sent for."

This thought comforted her as definite things did. So she put on her black felt hat, rather like that of a Tyrolese rifleman, but without the feather, and a thick cloth cape, fastening with a clasp, and marched

out of the house to send her telegrams—one to her sister, the other to Ronald Dodd, making an appointment at three o'clock.

There now remained no visible hope of a reconciliation unless Althea should submit. This last shred of hope was destroyed by Anne when Mrs. Dormer returned.

"Miss Althea," said the maid, "has just gone out and will not be back to lunch."

"You told her that I was leaving at five o'clock?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Anne, with well-simulated innocence. "Shall you be away long?"

"Until Miss Westbrooke desires me to return," said Mrs. Dormer, who always told the truth.

"That won't be just yet!" reflected the maid.

"I asked, ma'am," she said, "because cook was wondering who would do the housekeeping."

"She must arrange that with Miss Westbrooke."

Usually she said "Miss Althea." Anne appreciated the significance of the change.

The rest of the morning was spent in balancing the books. "She'll be nicely robbed when I'm gone," Mrs. Dormer reflected, not without a sense of satisfaction that this proof of her economic value should follow her departure.

Still, it was sad to think that the figures in the little red books would be left uncontrolled to run amuck through accuracy and honesty alike. Mrs

Dormer doubted whether cook was to be trusted, and was not sure of Anne.

The books were duly balanced. She placed thirty-five shillings which remained from housekeeping money in an envelope and addressed it to "Miss Westbrooke." Then she summoned the cook, and having pointed out an error of one loaf too much in the baker's book, informed her of the coming domestic anarchy.

After this Mrs. Dormer considered her duties ended, and sat down and tried to think what she should say to Ronald Dodd, whom she desired as an ally for reasons which only withstood honest scrutiny when lavishly bribed by prejudice. Even as she ate her cutlet at lunch without tasting it, the weight of the coming interview lay heavily on her. When the red omnibus left her at the poet's door she was still uncertain what to reveal, what to conceal. Her policy refused to shape itself clearly.

The faint rumour of a projected marriage between the Dodds and the Sancrofts had reached her, and she knew that the economic conditions reigning at Falconoke rendered the match, if not immediately urgent, at least attractive. These shadowy movements were all that she could rely upon, but she bent them resolutely to her will. If, she reasoned, the family forces could be brought to bear on the Colonel he might be prevented from making a fool of himself—or worse. A little plain speaking on the man's

part would, she believed, suffice to bring Althea to her senses. The poet might not be a good medium for setting this delicate machinery in motion, but he was the only one, and worth trying.

She was received in Ronald's study in a sort of half-tragic ceremony which at another time would have provoked her ridicule. His table was strewn with proofs of the new sonnet-series with which, like Shelley's high-born maiden, he was "soothing his love-laden soul," and for which he was now seeking a luminous title.

They had not met for several weeks, and she noticed a marked change in him. His blue eyes had lost their pretty lustre, his cheeks their colour, and he was visibly thinner. For the poet had done most things which a virtuous young man avoids. He had smoked the strongest Egyptian cigarettes procurable, and to excess; he had drunk champagne at all hours of the day and night, and not a little old brandy; he had irritated his nerves with absinthe, and his conscience with the counsels of Delamar de Bouteville, the *décadent* poet whom he addressed as "Cher Maître" in the French tongue, over which he had acquired a respectable mastery.

The following is an extract from his last letter :—

"I drown this passion in wine," he wrote, "poison it with absinthe, dull its tortures with nicotine! But it is all in vain. Every morning when I awake with my head on fire, a burning thirst in my mouth, and



shame in my soul, remorse wakes too, and despair !  
No, no ! there is no remedy, and in vain thou  
preachest to me, dear master, of the evil joys which  
blossom on the boughs of sin. As our sugary  
Tennyson hath it:—

“‘Hollow, hollow, hollow all delight !’”

Monsieur de Bouteville, author of “*Les Passions : Tempêtes et Bourrasques*,” represented the Parisian type, of which Ronald Dodd was the English equivalent. The pangs of the British bard’s despised love had been the subject of a brilliant, but over, analytical correspondence between them. De Bouteville had elected to live in a world of his own in which what he conceived to be art, but what was a profligacy draped with recondite adjectives, reigned supreme. Into this mephitic region he desired his English disciple to follow him. This invitation to browse in the devil’s pasture Ronald Dodd had accepted, and he was suffering from an acute attack of moral and physical dyspepsia when Mrs. Dormer appeared in his study.

Ronald Dodd moved forward a stiff, straight-backed, carved oak chair, which seemed suited to his visitor’s character.

“I have come to talk to you about Miss Westbrook, Mr. Dodd,” said she, sitting bolt upright with her feet, in thick laced boots, planted firmly on the ground.

"The last time we spoke of her," said he vindictively, "you told me to pack up my odes, elegies, and sonnets, and take them out of her sight; and I executed the manœuvre as gracefully as I could."

He had just lunched, principally on champagne, brandy, black coffee, and cigarettes, and this mixed diet was beginning to capture his intelligence. The toe-caps of Mrs. Dormer's boots, protruding from her thick cloth skirt, irritated him. He seemed to see nothing else in the room.

"I made a mistake," Mrs. Dormer replied, in a deep voice which seemed to match the thick boots; "but the fact is, I am leaving Miss Westbrooke to-day, and going to Bath, and it occurred to me that you might help me prevent her committing an indiscretion."

The poet began to feel wicked.

"Leaving Miss Westbrooke!" he exclaimed, "then you must have quarrelled about Colonel Sancroft."

"I am going," said Mrs. Dormer, who thought the poet's manner a little odd, "because I'm in the way."

He had always thought her in the way, and was not surprised.

"When I am gone," she resumed, "there will be no one to look after her. After what I said to you a few weeks ago, Mr. Dodd, it must seem absurd to appeal to you. Still you could help if you would."

"How?" he asked, consumed by the jealous curiosity common to his state.

"I have heard," replied Mrs. Dormer, who scorned subterfuges, "that the interests of your family and of the Sancrofts touch at a certain point. So far Miss Westbrooke has been the leader in this folly; but a hint from Sir Rupert Sancroft, before his son had gone too far, might—well, stop this nonsense."

"You mean that Miss Westbrooke is in love with the great Colonel?" said the poet, hot and cold with a jealousy which he could not quite realise in the haze.

"In love!" echoed his visitor contemptuously. "Oh, no; only infatuated for the moment."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"No, it's very different. I'll try to explain; but it isn't easy, and I dislike the subject intensely. Before Colonel Sancroft went to India there were a few sentimental passages between them. You know the sort of people among whom Althea lives—fluttering, feeble folk who write plays or books, or paint, or act. The very air she breathes is charged with false sentiment."

"If she had been an iceberg," he interrupted, with a contemptuous movement of his head, "I should have never heard of her."

"Now, Colonel Sancroft is a real man," she went on, without noticing his sneer, "a very vigorous and attractive plant among all the exotics who make a splendid background for his qualities, and he appeared at a dangerous moment."

"The psychological moment, as the reporters call it," jeered the poet, bitterly offended at the contrast, felt even through the fumes of old cognac.

"I mention this, Mr. Dodd," said Mrs. Dormer, with asperity, "because in this case there are excuses for Althea's weakness, and because you helped to undermine her practical good sense by dwelling constantly on those views of life which may be useful in your profession as a poet, but which are eminently dangerous for a young woman to apply to her dealings with the world."

"You mean because I made love to Miss Westbrook, therefore I prepared her to fall in love with another man? What astounding logic!"

"I mean nothing of the sort," she answered, flustered at the satirical curve which he had given to her words. "What I do mean is this. The whole foolish business of falling in love can be checked if taken in time."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the poet.

"You may laugh," she said severely, "but when you are as old as I am you'll find that I am right. But we are wandering from the point. Colonel Sancroft is a distinguished soldier and devoted to his profession. But his career must be in India; hers is on the stage. It is Sir Rupert's duty to stop his son on the brink of a great piece of folly; it is the son's duty to prevent Althea from compromising her reputation, and it is your interest to see that this is done."

"My interest!" retorted the poet. "I have none.

It has all vanished in smoke. Why don't you take Colonel Sancroft to task as you did me?"

"So I did, and *he* spoke like an honourable gentleman. But you know what men are with Althea."

Ronald Dodd rose and walked excitedly twice up and down the room whilst she watched him.

"The only thing that I can do," he said at last, "is to appeal to Miss Westbrooke, but it must be in my own way. As for Colonel Sancroft I wish to heaven they had shot him in India, or starved him, or frozen him before he came here like a blundering demi-god to create confusion. But if it's only infatuation I'll cure Althea. My Voltigia, dazzling with radiance and plumed with poetry, shall never fling herself away on a cold-blooded soldier, who slays savages by the book of arithmetic, and performs contemptible duties, such as a hundred years hence will be left to machinery supplied by contract. No, no! Leave Althea to me"—and he held out his arms as though she were seeking the refuge of his embrace—"I'll save her in spite of herself!"

It was now for the first time that Mrs. Dormer fully realised how great was her mistake. The poet, she perceived, was not himself; the faint odour of brandy which clung to him suggested a reason for his strange manner.

"I don't know whether you are aware that you are talking very wildly!" she said sternly.

He stopped, and made an effort to recover himself.

"Was I?" he said. "Well, I was thinking aloud. It's a relief sometimes. What you told me rather got on my nerves. However, I consider it a great compliment that you came to me although I am only a—what is it?—one of those 'feeble fluttering folk' who write poetry."

He laughed half hysterically. Mrs. Dormer rose to her feet with a suppressed groan, feeling that she lived in a world where she alone was sane.

"The whole thing's useless," she said, "and I give it up. I was mad to think that *you* could help me."

"Quite mad," said the poet, looking at her through a mist; "but we're all mad or else we shouldn't be here."

"The little wretch has been drinking," she thought with disgust, as she descended his stairs.

Then she hurried back to the flat. In the hall stood her box and portmanteau ready for the porter's shoulder. Althea, who had just returned, was standing in the drawing-room, by the tea-table, in her hat and jacket.

Mrs. Dormer had decided that a business-like view of her departure became her most.

"I have handed over all the books to cook," she said, "for I suppose she will do your housekeeping for the present."

"Thank you," said Althea. "Won't you have some tea? You have plenty of time."

She poured out a cup, which Mrs. Dormer took and sipped methodically.

"There's nothing else I need say," she observed, after a pause. "I shall stay with my sister at Bath. If ever you want me you have only to write."

"Thank you," said Althea. "But you will write to me sometimes, too, won't you?"

"When there is anything to say—yes."

The electric bell rang; the maid entered to announce that "they had come for the luggage."

"Tell them to put it on a four-wheeler," said Mrs. Dormer.

The door closed, the sound of men handling boxes—that familiar sound of departure—was heard outside.

"It isn't easy to realise that we are saying good-bye for good," said Mrs. Dormer.

"But it needn't be for good," replied Althea sadly, "unless you wish it."

Now she had won her victory, she found the fruits of it more bitter than she had expected.

But Mrs. Dormer was determined to give the emotions a wide berth.

"Of course I don't wish it," she said. "Let me know how you are going on. But it's time to go. Good-bye."

Then she kissed Althea, who, standing at her open door, heard the roar of the retreating lift below.

"She has gone," thought Althea, "and I'm my own mistress at last."

## CHAPTER XXII

THE day after Mrs. Dormer's visit, Ronald, with a splitting headache, decided that it was unnecessary to write to apologise for his conduct. The conversation had left a somewhat hazy impression on his mind ; but he understood that Mrs. Dormer had requested him to protect Althea against herself, and that he had received the appeal with flippancy.

Although for several weeks the love-sick poet had carefully avoided his family lest they should increase his pangs by sympathy or curiosity, his mother's letters had kept him informed of what was passing at Falconoke. He knew that the rumour coupling the names of Althea and Sancroft had reached Nutfield, and that his sister had been upset by it, but he inferred that it had not yet flown over the threshold of Falconoke.

The Colonel, who usually spent his week-ends with Sir Rupert, had recently called at Nutfield. His coming had apparently dispelled suspicions, for Lady Dodd insisted that no one could have been nicer, and deplored the maliciousness of the gossip which selected distinguished names for its innocent victims.



"Colonel Sancroft wondered that he had not met you in London," wrote Lady Dodd, "and wishes you would call to see him either in Jermyn Street or at the War Office."

Although Sancroft had left a card on Ronald, the jealous poet had not yet responded to the courtesy. "The fuss made about these confounded soldier fellows" displeased him as an indirect disparagement of his own "sacred calling," and he was determined to keep outside the silly ranks of dull adulators. But Ronald was a youth whose moods and resolutions had none of the tediousness of permanence. Even so light a straw as his mother's letter sufficed to change his policy of sulky resentment. The suggestion that he should call reminded him that in spirit he more resembled an Italian of the sixteenth century than an Englishman of the nineteenth. Suddenly he became aware of deep-rooted picturesque Machiavellian instincts. Jealousy was a feeling to be dissembled, and, if possible, to be avenged. Morbid curiosity, moreover, urged him to inquire into the relations existing between Sancroft and Althea, whom Mrs. Dormer had described as temporarily infatuated. In any case, it was his duty to save a woman of genius from a commonplace soldier, and self-analysis touching melodrama, as under encouragement it will, he determined to drain the cup of misery prepared for him even if it poisoned his life.

Thus it came to pass one chilly February morning

that he climbed up the narrow staircase in the old house in Westminster where Colonel Sancroft was laboriously welding a host of despatches into the permanent record of a complicated campaign.

Ronald sat down and made himself as agreeable as nature permitted. Here was the opportunity for practising the candour which is sometimes the detective's best defence against suspicion.

The Colonel received him politely, but his face exhibited no trace of the uneasiness which the poet's eye sought.

After hoping that the Colonel found his duties less tedious than the mass of papers on his desk suggested, by a natural transition he spoke of himself and his own work. The Colonel learnt that the poet was busy with a new poem for Miss Westbrooke, of which the subject was more sombre than "Voltigia," although more dramatic. The title was "Love, Conscience, and Fear." Whilst of course the treatment must be mainly symbolical, the idea was nevertheless suggested by the tragic story of Francesca da Rimini, as told by Dante.

The Colonel, who had never read it, said, "Indeed," wondering what the poet was driving at, yet listening politely.

"Miss Westbrooke," resumed the poet, "will understand the idea better than I can explain. The lost soul, straying through waste places, driven by

remorse and love, cannot fail to appeal to her fine genius."

"Have you—ah—discussed it yet with Miss Westbrooke?" asked Sancroft.

"No. I want to send it to her as a surprise, and so I hope you will say nothing about it."

"Certainly not, if you don't wish it."

"You see," resumed the artless poet, "I can't help talking of what my mind is full. That is why I haven't called on Miss Westbrooke lately. If I saw her, I'm convinced the whole scheme would come out. But, by the by, of course you have heard that the invaluable duenna has departed."

"She has gone to her sister at Bath," said the accurate Colonel.

"To Bath! An excellent place, too," replied the poet, with the prettiest air of irresponsible levity which he could assume. "She used to frighten me dreadfully! It took me two days to recover from the tragic visit she paid me on the morning she left!"

The shot hit its mark.

"Surely," thought Sancroft, "that woman cannot have appealed to this babbling rhymster!"

"The duenna, as I called her long ago," resumed Ronald confidently, "and the name stuck like a foolish burr, has always been under the delusion that Miss Westbrooke couldn't get on without her."

"I think Mrs. Dormer was a most useful companion," replied Sancroft gravely.

"No doubt," replied the poet; "but then useful companions are generally bores. I'm sure Mrs. Dormer was. And we couldn't expect Miss Westbrooke to put up with her as a permanent institution."

The soldier's face hardened, but he made no reply.

"Of course the duenna added to the artistic completeness of the picture," resumed the poet; "but even the best of us must throw over some of our ballast as we float toward the sun. But I'm wasting your time with my idle gossip. One must lunch. Will you lunch with me at the Paragon Club at half-past one? That will leave you a whole hour to make history out of all those formidable-looking papers."

But the Colonel unfortunately had an appointment at the Adjutant-General's office, and could not come, and so his insidious visitor departed on a little ripple of congratulatory irony. When he was gone San-croft, seeing clouds rising, frowned thoughtfully for some time over his papers. It was a new sensation to feel like a hypocrite.

A few days after this incursion into hostile territory in disguise, Ronald Dodd called on Althea on her At Home day, arriving at three o'clock, before any of her callers. It was their first meeting since Mrs. Dormer had driven him away. He entered the room with all his most amiable armour buckled round him, and, like the pious Æneas, feigned hope on his

countenance whilst he pressed down bitterness deep in his heart.

"I have been wondering whether I should ever see you again," said Althea, rising to meet him. "What have you been doing all this time?"

His visit filled her with uneasiness. Out of the rejected lover the malignant critic is made. She suspected his waspish qualities and feared the motives of his visit.

"So much," said he, "has happened since I was here last. I feel years older."

"You are not looking well," she said, obeying the instinct of self-preservation which whispered, "propitiate this man if you can."

"I have not been well," said he.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Nothing very romantic—a slight congestion of the liver—a most humiliating ailment. But I have had other ills to bear beside physical ones. But we won't talk of them. The last time I was here you forbade me to talk of my feelings."

"Then I spoke like a wise woman."

"Of course you did. As the hero of Locksley Hall observes, they are 'dangerous guides.' But I have been to the Empyrean once or twice. *Mes compliments!* You are more wonderful than ever. The critic who insists that you are 'grasping tenderer meanings' is perfectly right. Even genius like yours

can learn something from the experience of the emotions."

"I am glad you think me improving," she replied, ignoring his irony. "But let us talk of something else. You have heard that Mrs. Dormer has gone?"

"Yes. She always hated me, but I forgive her. The same spirit which is leading you to 'tenderer meanings' is teaching me philosophy."

"You are too subtle for me," said she.

"No, no, too frank. The qualities are often mistaken."

Now that she had lost her shield of fearless candour, she found the poet difficult to manage. Beneath his easy nonchalance she detected the cryptic jealousy of the rejected lover. She had heard from Sancroft of Mrs. Dormer's visit and wondered nervously what it might presage.

Should she ignore it? No, the strategy of the hunted ostrich was too ignominious, and in the poet's smile she seemed to read a malignant purpose. He had seen Sancroft and talked in vague parables; now he was hovering outside her secret. What had Mrs. Dormer said? The thought goaded her to meet him defiantly, without subterfuges, and at close quarters.

"Why," she asked, "did Mrs. Dormer go to see you before she left?"

"I thought that was a secret," he answered, feigning surprise.

"It might have been if you had not told Colonel Sancroft."

"Yes, but I overlooked the probability of his telling you."

"But why did she come?"

"Perhaps a restless conscience sent her. She may have thought she had treated me badly and have desired to make atonement."

"Then what form did her atonement take, Mr. Dodd?"

"Her sayings were dark and I may have missed her meaning, but I concluded that her sister at Bath had greater need of her services than you."

"Did she say so?"

"Oh, no! It was rather my inference than her statement."

Althea sighed faintly.

"I seem predestined to take your frankness for subtlety," she said.

"Frankness and homage are not always well paired," he answered. "However, the result of our conversation was that she classed me as a useless item among the feeble folk who flutter round you."

"Then she did ask you to do something?"

"Yes, and when I hesitated she criticised me with her customary asperity. But what does it matter? If Mrs. Dormer is your most devoted friend, yet we must not forget that she thinks 'Marmion' the finest poem in the English language!"

Then the poet looked at Althea, and perceived that she understood.

"I'm afraid," he continued, "that I'm chattering very impertinently. You'll end in finding me more intolerable than Mrs. Dormer at her worst. But, by the by, have you seen the Burne-Jones exhibition yet?"

"No."

"One picture, 'The Depth of the Sea,' will greatly interest you, although I wonder how you will read the allegory. A mermaid is bearing a dead mariner down, down—down through the grey-green waters. She has found that which she sought with her inmost heart, and her smile haunts you. Still, a stalwart seafarer hauling a nymph aboard a pirate craft would present the instincts of our race and of my sex in a juster light. Don't you think so? It is the fair white dove we sacrifice, not the hawk. It is the woman who pays the full price of human passion."

The arrival of other callers spared Althea the necessity of replying; but she saw that Mrs. Dormer had converted the rejected lover into a jealous spy.

The next day the poor poet was more miserable than ever. He had emptied his quiver without comfort to himself. Vainly seeking to ease his mind, he wrote to De Bouteville, who replied that "vengeance was the next best thing to love," but the



poet well knew that these values held good only in the popular French novel. And then, what vengeance could he deal out? To be tragic in England is to be ridiculous. London, after all, was not Florence of the Medicis! The dagger and the poison are out of date even in British melodrama!

He likened himself to a wayfarer by night through a tropical forest. "At any moment," he thought, "I may tread on the snake!" And then what triumph was there to trace the guilty feet of a successful rival along paths from which his own had been banished? Moreover, the very tracks disappeared underground. Scandal scarcely whispered; only a few malicious heads wagged behind stage-doors. Althea sang and danced even as when Mrs. Dormer had marshalled all the properties as an escort. A new poet with a novel rhythmic measure had been discovered for her who drew all London to the Empyrean, and whose praises were as salt to the jealous sores of the rival bard.

And now, alas! the author of the now almost forgotten "Voltigia" descended to his crowning meanness. He spied by proxy, and paid a big fee to a firm of private detectives, whose base stories served as a hair-shirt to his sick soul.

In vain his mother, curing an attack of bronchitis at Cannes in the company of Sir Francis and her daughter, urged her dear boy to join them. Ronald remained where jealousy had planted him until

Easter came and he read in the papers Colonel Sancroft's name among the officers to be present at a great military display prepared for the French President at Longchamps.

Next a paragraph in a newspaper announcing that Miss Westbrooke intended to take a much-needed rest on the Continent made the jealous goat-footed things dance through the poet's brain. When the private inquiry office begged to inform their client that Althea was about to leave London for an ancient but little-known hotel in Paris, near the Rue du Bac, the poet packed his portmanteau and prepared to do his espionage himself.

## CHAPTER XXIII

OF all the rumours which Ronald's spies had collected, the report that Sancroft was secretly married to Althea tormented his selfish jealousy most. The rumour had come through Althea's servants by the way of the hall-porter, and the poet saw certain reasons lending it some probability which he thus defined. The Colonel had reached a point in his professional career when the acknowledgment of such a match would be disadvantageous to his advancement in the service, whilst, at the same time, it would be extremely disagreeable to his family, who were anxious for a brilliant marriage.

As the brother of the lady whom Sancroft had made somewhat conspicuous by his attention, and as the executor of the banished duenna's commission, Ronald considered that he had a two-fold right to know the truth.

Monsieur Délamar de Bouteville had paid several brief visits to London as his English disciple's guest, and when he heard of the approaching journey to Paris insisted that his English *confrère* should stay with him.

The son of a wealthy manufacturer (Bouteville

without the *de*), Délarar cultivated the muses of the nether-world, and gave them little rest in an elegant apartment near the Boulevard St. Germain, not far from the secluded hotel where Althea was staying.

Ronald arrived at his friend's rooms in good time for the feast organised in his honour. In the pretty dining-room, hung with strange pictures by the youngest and most eccentric painters of the moment, four covers were laid, over the mantelpiece was the photograph of Althea as "Voltipia," and a bright wood fire danced and crackled on the hearth.

De Bouteville received his friend in the white and gold *salon* adjoining with effusion.

"I am glad to see thee. Felix Huby, the painter, and Antoine Berrubé, the *romancier*, whose 'Dregs of Love' thou hast most sympathetically tasted, dine with us to-night. Spiritual souls both and worthy of thee, thou poet of the *blonde Albion*! But first we will make our toilets, and then shalt thou tell of thy loves. Jacques, my valet, will unmake thy port-manteau. Go, Jacques, conduct monsieur to his chamber, and treat him with all that care that thou forgettest to bestow on thy master!"

And so Ronald retired with the valet and soon returned immaculate of shirt front to the *salon*, where his host awaited him.

Délarar de Bouteville was tall and fair, and of distinguished but dissipated appearance. What art he had was overweighted with degenerate affectations.

But although he cultivated pessimism with all the ardour of his dismal school, yet he never succeeded in stifling the cheerfulness of his race.

French is a language in which it is a luxury for the emotional foreigner who has mastered its idioms to talk about his feelings. It is the language in which man blushes least for his vices or follies. Even improprieties can drape themselves becomingly, and when propped up by choice adjectives may pass themselves off as picturesque experiments in conduct. And so Ronald made his plunge, and revealed his sorrows to his friend, or rather, since he had analysed them in his letters, trotted them out again for his brother expert to review.

When he had finished the recital of his griefs de Bouteville diagnosed them.

"The lady," he said, "has treated thee with unmerited disdain. Love is a disease which has a crisis, a convalescence, and a cure, and thy fever is high. Thy charming 'Voltigia' should have won the lady's heart. But, alas, thy pearls were wasted. But what thou needest is the punishment of the culpable pair, who perhaps even now deride thee together. But *le poète vaut bien le militaire*. When our guests arrive, wilt thou permit me to present thy case as one which concerns thee not, but in which a friend of thine is the protagonist? In these matters the Frenchman is less the slave of tradition than the Englishman. In love there is no justice, only

victories and defeats, and, when we cannot enjoy love's triumphs, we can at least avenge love's overthrow. The victim must smoke on the god's altar, but beware that the blood is not wrung from thine own heart."

Thus, at considerable length, and with great personal satisfaction, Monsieur de Bouteville spoke until his guests arrived.

Berrubé, the temporarily famous author of "The Dregs of Love," came first. This proud possessor of a fiery soul was sallow and anæmic, with thick coarse hair which touched his collar, and tired eyes that blinked through a *pince-nez*. Huby the painter was short, plump, and rosy, with the air of one whose philosophy accepts a good digestion as an advantage to be cultivated, and a round, full voice to suit the jolly curves of his portly figure. Ronald had written of Berrubé in *The Vortex*, and his father had purchased one of Huby's landscapes, and their sympathies met at many points.

The dinner which de Bouteville had planned with the view of raising the drooping spirits of his English guest was one which diners like Huby do not easily forget. Excellent wines and matchless liqueurs, whilst they tempt wit from its stronghold behind wisdom, also entice folly to dance naked and unashamed.

Before dinner was over, when vinous frankness had banished common sense from the table, Ronald's

loves were discussed as the impersonal sorrows of an absent Werther, de Bouteville having provided the facts with a lavish disregard of accuracy.

The discussion wandered far afield, touched philosophic pessimism on one side and melodrama on the other; and when de Bouteville tried to sum it up, he reached nothing clear.

"Berrubé," said he, "thinks the poet should provoke the soldier to a duel. Whether he kill his rival or is slain himself, the drama has an end; and since it is necessary that to all dramas must be an end, by this means it will be attained. This solution of the problem leaves much to be desired. In this reasoning I may be pardoned for seeing the philosophy of Don Quixote. On the other hand, Huby suggests the unheroic views of Sancho Panza."

"*A la bonne heure,*" interrupted the painter, laughing. "*Vive le brave Sancho Panza ! Les tragédies sont bêtes.*"

"Our friend argues, I trust ironically," resumed de Bouteville, shaking his head reproachfully, "that the dancer's refusal of the poet's offer of marriage is also a logical conclusion, affording facile escape. From a love entanglement he considers any escape better than none, nor does he hesitate to confess that, were he the rejected, he would escape the position with philosophy, and seek in the cultivation of his art the serenity of soul which he deems alone essential to human happiness. But I maintain that this same

serenity of soul which he preaches is impossible of attainment until vengeance have been inflicted. The rival and the lady must be humiliated in their own eyes and, if possible, in the eyes of the world before the lover can retire in peace to plant his cabbages. Nothing is more dishonourable than submission in a world where the will of the strong is supreme. What thinkest thou, Ronald ?”

Ronald, exalted with excitement, and the wine that he had drunk buzzing in his brain like an angry bee, answered solemnly :

“Wounded pride can only be appeased by retaliatory justice. I think as you, *cher mattre*. There must be vengeance before there can be peace.”

The poet was scarcely capable of making so foolish a speech in his native tongue, but in French the utterance seemed perfectly rational.

“Let us drink a toast,” said de Bouteville, whilst his servant filled the glasses with champagne. “May the loves of the poet flourish, and those of his rival be brought to confusion.”

All the glasses were promptly drained.

“*Tiens ! mais je le plains beaucoup, ce pauvre poète,*” said Huby, with a deep breath of satisfaction.

But the two visitors, to whom the poet was a nameless shadow, had evidently had enough of his ghostly presence.

Then, after a course of liqueurs and cigarettes,



Huby, and Berrubé departed to keep another engagement.

The poets, left alone, gazed at one another in silence, both imperfectly sober. Ronald had drunk more than de Bouteville. The insidious admixture of wines and liqueurs had captured his intelligence. The dramatic forces behind the situation seemed to urge him on.

"Délamar," said he, "I am resolved!"

"To what, *mon ami*?"

"To act. Althea is at the Hotel de petit St. Pierre in the street of that name."

"A droll house for so smart a lady to descend surely, but a most respectable. 'Tis the favourite resort of well-to-do ecclesiastics and country gentry with relations in the *faubourg*, and chosen in the case of the fair Muse, I doubt not, to escape the too curious eyes of compatriots."

"Délamar! I am going to see her."

"To make a scene? Beware, my friend. It is too late for visits of ceremony."

"But not too late to learn the truth."

"What truth?"

"It might all mean nothing."

"What—a mere flirtage?"

"Yes. Or there may be a secret marriage."

"Or there may not be. I understand. It is difficult, but an act of courage may take the position by storm."

The Frenchman rose to the occasion. He had seen Althea in "Vultigia," and had lauded her in a wicked boulevard print. Flinging the end of his cigarette with unnecessary energy into the fire, he rose to his feet, and, taking a decanter which held old brandy, filled a small wine-glass to the brim.

"Drink," said he. "It will strengthen thy nerves for the hour of trial."

Then leaving Ronald with the glass in his hand, he went to his bedroom and returned with a small ivory-handled revolver.

"Go," said he, "take this, and so shalt thou protect thyself, for who knows what thou mayest not find. I will accompany thee and wait—in the street. Jacques' our coats."

The young men rose; Ronald placed the pistol in his breast-pocket, where it crushed uncomfortably his stiff shirt-front. The valet helped them on with their coats, and they walked down the carpeted stone steps to the street. The night was chilly and clear, the stars were shining like cold points of fire in the black sky.

"All immensity looks down on us," said de Bouteville, stopping suddenly and glancing up at the sky, "but sees us not. There is no life above; only mighty solitude and the immeasurable contempt of the silences for man."

After this apostrophe, he turned up the fur collar

of his coat to his ears, and lit another cigarette at the end of the last, and walked on.

They ascended the Boulevard for a hundred yards, until de Bouteville stopped at the street bisecting it.

"'Tis here, the Rue petit St. Pierre," said he. "Yonder is the hotel."

They walked thither in silence, and halted under the electric light, which beacons from its entrance.

"*Nous voilà*," said de Bouteville. "Go! and do thy duty."

Ronald had walked at his side like a man in a dream, "as a soul hypnotised by a dominant idea," as the Frenchman afterwards explained.

Ronald entered the swinging glass-door. Of the lady in black silk, making entries in a long narrow ledger, he inquired whether Miss Westbrooke were in.

"She has just returned, monsieur," was the calm reply.

"Will you be good enough to send her my card and say that I wish to see her!"

Madame waved the poet into a chair, pressed an electric button, gave the card, with whispered instructions, to a *maitre d'hotel* with opulent side-whiskers, and resumed her bookkeeping.

"She measures the world by *diners* and *thés complets*," thought the poet. "And I—what is my measure?"

The brandy had loosened his lips and he smiled a foolish smile. Still the thought pleased him, and the

butt of the pistol which goaded his side seemed a sufficient answer to his question.

The man returned, and requested "Monsieur" to be good enough to follow him.

Crossing the hall through the glass doors he saw de Bouteville waiting hopefully for an adequate curtain.

On the wide stairs a badly-shaved ecclesiastic, descending, bowed serenely, and Ronald felt the waft of stale incense as he passed.

"I am the instrument in the hands of fate," he thought dreamily.

A vision of dim aisles and faint church music followed in the wake of the priest. Beneath this vague impression a sort of purpose had followed in his mind.

On the third landing the man halted, and opening a heavy door, with a profuse rolling of the *r*, announced—

"Monsieur Ronal' Dodd!"

The poet entered. Althea, in evening dress, was standing by a wood fire, against a background of dark velvet. The lofty room, with its sombre hangings across the two tall windows, badly lighted by two candles and the dancing fire-glow, bore an aspect of departed grandeur that lent it a sinister dignity.

"And so," she said, without moving from the tall mantelpiece, on which she leant one bare arm, "you have followed me here."

## The Heart of the Dancer

Her voice seemed far away, and he stood by the door watching her for a moment in silence.

"Are you alone in this place?" he said at last.

"Yes," she replied haughtily, "unless you see ghosts."

"Ghosts!" he repeated, "the room is full of them. I see the shadow of fear, of remorse, and of the repentance which is too late. Before your threshold grief and avenging cares have spread their couches, and I am the voice of warning."

Then she perceived that his voice was thick, his face pale, and his eyes bright, but, seeing a meaning in his incoherence, did not at first suspect the cause.

"Have you followed me here to make a scandal?" she asked.

"No; to save you against yourself."

The phrase had chased her across the channel. In the gaunt room of the old hotel it sounded more than ever ridiculous.

"You mean," she replied, "to spoil my holiday."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the poet hysterically, moving a step nearer, "in the language of the country let us call it a *voyage de nocce*."

Althea flushed angrily, but the foolish laughter accounted for the insolent speech.

"I don't know whether you are aware of it, Mr. Dodd," she said severely, "but you are scarcely behaving as a gentleman."

"I am discharging a duty instead—a sacred duty.

One in which I am ready to sacrifice even my self-respect."

"Self-respect!" she exclaimed, with a half-pitiful glance at the wild-eyed youth, whose smooth hair had fallen over his brows and whose words knocked together like the peas in a fool's rattle; "if you had any left you would leave this room and never come near me again. Go! I am ashamed to see you like this. Once I thought you were my friend."

"I'm more than your friend. I love you like a madman. Answer me this. Are you married to Colonel Sancroft?"

"No! and I forbid you to mention his name. Go!"

She moved towards the door, but he stepped between it and her, and, with a half-insane impulse, drew the revolver from his pocket and flourished it.

"If he were here," he said, "'twould be my duty to shoot him. Who is this slayer of savage men that he has come between us and dared to drag my bright star into the murk of vulgar disgrace? My Voltigia! Or shall I shoot myself and be done with it all?"

Uncertain how far he was playing a part, how far in earnest, she sprang towards him.

"Give it to me, Ronald!" she exclaimed, and, seizing his right hand, tried to drag the pistol from his grasp.

A brief struggle ensued, ending in a flash and a report. The smoking pistol fell on the carpet between them.

Althea felt a sharp sting in her side and staggered back as from a blow.

"You have hurt me," she said.

"Good God! Althea," said the young man, trembling with horror, "what have I done?"

He was almost sober now. The pungent smell of smoke filled the room, but the clatter of hoofs on the asphalt in the streets had deadened the sound.

"Go, before they come," said Althea. "I'm not hurt. There will be a scandal if you stay. Whatever happens there must not be a scandal! I will say the thing went off by accident. Go! go! go at once."

Below some one was knocking violently at a door; steps were heard on the stairs.

"Go," she entreated, as he still hesitated. "If you are found here the police will be called in."

Then, his nerve failing, the poet hurried from the room.

"*C'était un coup de pistolet,*" said a waiter on the landing, eyeing him suspiciously; but Ronald reached the street without being stopped, feeling like a man in an evil dream escaping he knows not from what horror.

Meanwhile Althea had seated herself in the arm-chair and had placed the pistol on the table ready for the emergency. She was faint and sick; something warm was trickling down her side.

A chamber-maid and a waiter entered in some agitation. A report of a firearm had been heard on

that landing. Could Madame account for it? Then Althea confessed that it was her foolish habit to carry a pistol. It had exploded accidentally. A couple of napoleons, and the request that no fuss should be made, brought the incident to a conclusion.

"Trust me," said the man. "We will reassure *le patron*."

"*Tiens ? mais c'est un drôle d'histoire*," he added, as they were descending the stairs with the pocketed bribe.

"*Et ce jeune homme qui vient de se sauver ?*" suggested the *femme-de-chambre*.

"*Ah, je m'en fiche ça ne nous regarde pas*," said the other, with the incuriosity which has been purchased.

When she was alone, Althea rose and looked down at herself in the tall glass. Her face was white, her nerves were shaken; on the left side of her dress a faint red mark was slowly beginning to appear through the lustre of the white satin.

"The wretched tipsy poet," she thought remorsefully.

There was something ridiculous in a scene which might have ended in a tragic scandal.

She went to her room to see to her hurt. It proved less slight than she had anticipated. The small bullet had cut through her corsets and grazed her side. When she had staunched the blood and bound a bandage round her side a knock was heard at her bedroom door. She flung on a loose gown and



stept into the adjoining *salon*. It was the *femme-de-chambre* with a letter.

A tall gentleman was waiting below, *Monsieur le Colonel*, she thought.

The envelope simply contained Sancroft's card. On it was written, "I must see you to-night—if possible."

The gilt clock on the tall mantelpiece struck half-past ten.

"Show Monsieur up, please," said Althea. She had dined with him that evening. After dinner he had left her to go a reception at the Ministère de la Guerre.

"Apparently," she reflected, with some bitterness of feeling, "he is losing his terror of a scandal.

When Sancroft, dreading a scene, entered the room, he was too absorbed in his own thoughts to see how pale she was. This woman, he knew, loved him, and the time for breaking with her had come.

"Althea," he said. "I have had bad news. There is trouble in India. The whole North-West frontier is in a blaze."

"What has that to do with us?" she asked, in terror of coming disaster.

"It means a new frontier war. The outposts have been driven in; a company of British infantry has been slaughtered to a man, and the Commander-in-Chief has telegraphed for me. I'm ordered out."

"When?" asked Althea, whilst the walls of the room swam behind a dizzy haze.

"Immediately—by the first boat."

"For how long?" she asked, groping for hope in the chill, inner darkness.

"For at least two years. They have given me a big command."

The satisfaction in his voice made the cold in her breast icier.

"Ah, you're glad to go," she said.

He paused a moment to see what truth was in her words before he answered :

"I never thought I should be so reluctant to return to duty."

"It's all over between us, then?"

"You remember what we agreed, Althea?"

"I remember."

"The thing's inevitable. But I shall never forget you."

Here was her reward at last. She had flung her pride at this man's feet, and he recompensed her by a promise—to remember the sacrifice!

She stood a moment, struggling against the climbing, hysterical gasps of defeat and humiliation, finally conquering, whilst he with a grave face looked on, scarcely conscious of the intensity of the struggle.

"Good-bye, Althea," he said, "and God bless you."

He caught her in his arms and kissed her, but the pressure inflicted sickening pain on her hurt side. He felt her face grow cold, and saw her eyes fade. Her visible, uncomplaining suffering affected him

deeply, whilst the sense of his own selfishness smote him like a hammer.

"Is it good-bye for ever?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "unless we make a mighty mistake. Good-bye."

"The man goes," she said; "the woman stays."

"Yes, it's inevitable—when they can't go together. God bless you again. I hope you will never be ashamed of having liked me a little."

"Nor you of having thought you cared for me."

"Forgive me if I have caused you pain, Althea."

"Yes, I forgive you."

Then she let him go. He looked round from the door as she stood, dazed with a sense of her loss, which grew till its vast bulk seemed to shadow all her existence. Then seeing her face, grief-stricken and beautiful but uncomplaining, he hesitated a moment; but a bugle rang clearly from the street, and he heard the tramp of soldiers' feet, and remembered that the man who sacrifices himself for the mawkish passion called love is a weakling destined to be flung aside by fate in the race to renown. Before him lay honour, fame, and the great stirring world of action in the arena of the Empire he served; behind him was—an intrigue.

"Good-bye, Althea," he said firmly.

Her lips moved, but no words came.

Then he closed the door gently, and slowly descended the stairs.

## CHAPTER XXIV

THE last piece of pudding had disappeared from the plate of the youngest pupil, and the schoolmistress was glancing down the long table, considering which young lady should be called upon to say grace, when a servant brought Mrs. Dormer a telegram.

"Not quite so much noise, please, young ladies," said the schoolmistress.

"*Un peu de silence, s'il vous plait, mesdemoiselles !*" re-echoed the French governess.

Then the buzzing and giggling ceased, and twenty-four young ladies, between the ages of sixteen and eight, all turned inquisitive faces towards their mistress's sister reading her telegram.

It was signed "Sancroft," and said :—

"Miss Westbrooke alone, Paris, Hotel petit St. Pierre. Would be kind to see her. Leave for India at once."

Mrs. Dormer began to sniff a triumph.

"No bad news, I hope, Sarah?" said the schoolmistress.

"On the contrary, gratifying," replied Mrs. Dormer.

The schoolmistress glanced down the narrow table and said :

" Attention, please, young ladies. Miss Pike, will you oblige me by saying grace ? "

Miss Pike obeyed ; the girls rose and proceeded to the door, where they curtseyed to their chief instructress (not, as was frequently explained, as a sign of personal deference, but for practice). This ceremony being ended, the passage and hall were flooded with an irrepressible outburst of released high spirits.

The two sisters, separated by the whole length of the table, were now alone, and the eyes of the schoolmistress demanded an explanation.

" Miss Westbrooke is at Paris, and I am wanted," said Mrs. Dormer, for once adjusting facts to suit convenience.

" Indeed ! "

" Yes, and I shall start by the night mail."

" Miss Westbrooke," said the schoolmistress, who had not been taken into her sister's confidence, " is capricious, and, I fear, inconsiderate. However, Sarah, I suppose you understand your own affairs best."

" I ought to," said Mrs. Dormer, with her mind bent on trains and boats, " and I'll pack at once."

Before going to her room she stepped into the severe little apartment described as the library, where she found the *Times*. The words " Serious Rising in India " had previously caught her eye, but she had

been too deeply absorbed in nursing her own grievances to be reached by the burdens of Empire.

The great journal foresaw serious trouble throughout the North-Western frontier, and was perturbed. A fanatic was preaching a *jehad*—Mrs. Dormer was uncertain what a *jehad* was, but it sounded formidable—and a company of the Southshire Regiment had been “surprised” and slaughtered to a man. There was no cause for alarm, but prompt action was necessary. The Government might (in the opinion of the leader writer) be trusted to act with vigour, but had they followed his and the editor’s advice the present outbreak would never have occurred. As it was they must make the best of a bad business. Then turning from generalities to details, the *Times* was pleased to hear that an important command had been given to Colonel Sancroft, and was persuaded that his appointment would give universal satisfaction in India. And thus for a column. The journalist rated Her Majesty’s Government much as Mrs. Dormer’s sister rated those of her pupils whom she considered on questions of conduct old enough to know better.

But Mrs. Dormer doubted whether India’s satisfaction at receiving Colonel Sancroft could compare with her relief at getting rid of him. The war was a blessing in disguise. The holy fanatic of whom the *Times* spoke with so much disdain seemed a sort of ally. Less intelligent persons than herself, she

thought, might even see in it the pre-arrangement of Providence to prevent Althea and Sancroft committing an act of folly. Sancroft's telegram was a homage to her wounded pride. He, at least, understood that Althea could not get on without her!

The world seemed a cheerful place again. She glanced into the garden, where the girls were playing cross-touch. The lilac bushes, just tipped with green, and the snowdrops, defying the cold wind, were full of comforting suggestions. Her sister's school bored her to extinction; thoughts of escape were pleasant. Mrs. Dormer believed strongly in discipline, but disliked primness, and Jane was prim and growing primmer.

Then the problem of managing Althea represented itself to her mind. She must be more careful in future—less exacting, more gentle. Of course Althea had been terribly spoilt, but imagine how most young women would have come out of the ordeal!

Then Mrs. Dormer flung herself at her packing, and requested her sister to send for a fly. The schoolmistress complied, but criticised the sudden departure as erratic and unnecessary. Mrs. Dormer replied that she had no time to argue, pecked her sister coldly on the cheek, and drove through the solemn streets of Bath on the first stage of her journey.

At half-past eight on the following morning she appeared at the Hôtel petit St. Pierre when the sleek

ecclesiastics were taking their first breakfast. It seemed an odd place for Althea to choose, still there was a certain austere reserve about it which pleased Mrs. Dormer. It suggested the good black silk gowns of her youth, quite unpretentious but eminently respectable, and a protest against wicked luxury.

The passage had been rough, the boat late in consequence, and Paris was barely awake when she arrived at the station, but the prospect of resuming authority over the rebellious Althea made discomfort and fatigue the unconsidered trifles in the day's march of a conqueror.

Moreover, there was another incentive—curiosity—one of the ruling forces of mankind, although we are ashamed to admit it.

Althea, they told her doubtfully, was unwell. The lady in black silk at the *bureau*, smelling a romance, handed over Mrs. Dormer to the *femme-de-chambre*, who discreetly dared to hope that "Madame Vestbrooke was merely temporarily indisposed."

"*Mademoiselle!*" interrupted Mrs. Dormer, in abominable French, "*Mademoiselle Westbrooke, grande actress Onglaise, fille de clergyman et très respectée chez nous!*"

"Ah!" exclaimed the Frenchwoman, giving the interjection, whatever meaning the hearer might desire it to convey. "*Mais nous voilà.*"

Then she opened the door of the *salon* gently to show her sympathy with the *malade*. But Mrs.



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Dormer thought it stuffy, and directed her to open the window.

The early noises of Paris entered the room—the cries of the newsboys, less hoarse than those of London, the odour of coffee roasting and wood burning.

Having thus clutched at the skirts of authority, Mrs. Dormer knocked softly at Althea's door and walked in.

Althea's head was sunk in the pillows of an old-fashioned French, bed whose sombre hangings bore a sort of theatrical resemblance to a bier. The room dark, lofty, and solemn, whispered, "My interests are with the past."

"Oh, it's you, Aunt Dormer," said Althea. She felt there was nothing now in the world to be surprised at, any more than in an ugly dream.

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Dormer, approaching the bed.

"Only, please, don't ask me questions about what has happened," said Althea.

"Not one," replied Mrs. Dormer meekly.

She went to the window and drew the curtains. A narrow strip of sunshine spread itself across the faded carpet.

"Ah!" sighed Althea, turning away from the light.

"Only for a minute to see how you are," said Mrs. Dormer, taking her hot hand gently.

"My dear, you're feverish," she added.

On each side of Althea's cheeks was a patch of colour, and her eyes were full of the wistfulness of fever.

Althea looked up at the familiar, featherless felt hat and the resolute kindly face it shaded, and found comfort in it.

"I thought you were at Bath."

"So I was yesterday."

"How did you know I was here?"

"He telegraphed."

Althea looked inquiringly.

"Colonel Sancroft, I mean."

Althea turned her face from Mrs. Dormer's gaze. She wanted to lie in the dark and forget, but the deeper the darkness, the greater her restlessness had been. All night long her thoughts had hunted her pride through the valley of humiliation in a endless circle.

"I *must* take your temperature," said Mrs. Dormer.

Here was something definite to do. She clutched at the opportunity as the first step towards reasserting her influence.

Her travelling bag was on the table of the *salon*. It contained the clinical thermometer without which she never travelled.

Althea watched her through the open door. Mrs. Dormer's life seemed as full of method as hers of anarchy.

"So long as I did what I wanted," thought de-

feated pride, "nothing mattered, and until yesterday it never did matter."

Mrs. Dormer returned.

"You were always fond of taking temperatures," Althea said, as she submitted.

"Because when it's 'up' one sends for the doctor."

But a knock at the door interrupted Mrs. Dormer's diagnosis.

It was the chamber-maid, with whom she conferred on the threshold of the door. The white-capped *bonne* explained, in a voice modulated to the solemnity of the sick-room, that the gentleman who had called four times yesterday had come again—"très agité."

"If it is Mr. Dodd," said Althea, overhearing the whispered conversation, "tell him he didn't hurt me much."

"Hurt! Good heavens! What has he done?" cried Mrs. Dormer.

"I'll leave him to tell you—only don't make a fuss."

Mrs. Dormer frowned and step into the *salon*, closing the door just as the well-bribed *femme-de-chambre* ushered in the poet from the landing.

"I guessed it was you," he said, "from the description."

"Not so loud, please," she replied, in a stern whisper, pointing towards the bedroom door.

The poet uttered a nervous gasp.

"Surely it isn't dangerous!"

His chin was unshaven, his hair badly brushed, and his voice shook. Fear, anxiety, dissipation, shame, had left marks on their victim.

"What isn't dangerous?" she asked, bending threatening black brows on him. "What isn't dangerous?"

"Didn't she tell you? I shot her. It was an accident—the cursed thing went off in my hands."

"And then you ran away," said Mrs. Dormer contemptuously.

"She made me—to prevent a scandal. If anything happens to her, I'll kill myself."

He wrung his hands wildly, and stood swaying his weary body on the hysterical verge of tears, whilst she watched him pitilessly.

"Wait here," said Mrs. Dormer. "She never told me. And, for goodness' sake, behave like a man!"

Then the harassed lady returned to Althea's bedside, and, sick with apprehension, examined the wound.

"The wretched melodramatic idiot might have killed you!" she exclaimed, gently rearranging the bandage.

"The whole thing is as ridiculous as an incident in a cheap farce," said Althea moodily.

"It was nearly a tragedy."

"Tragedy—no. A vulgar, silly farce with a pistol

scene! Look in the right-hand drawer; you will find it. The hotel people believe I let it off by accident. That's the plot. Please return it to Mr. Dodd with my compliments, and tell him the next time he wants to shoot me that he had better try before dinner."

Mrs. Dormer looked pitifully at the young woman raging ineffectually on her pillows, and returned to the poet, with wrath in her heart and the pistol in her hand,

"Here," she said rudely, "take this. You must have been mad or intoxicated."

"Mad and drunk both," said he. "Don't spare me, only tell me, for God's sake, whether she is much hurt."

"Hurt! She might have been killed. Luckily, the bullet only cut her left side. If I had been here I would have sent you to prison—as you deserve. The only thing you can do now is to fetch a doctor—an English one if possible, if not, an American. Then go away, and never come near her or me again."

But her abuse scarcely reached his pride as his mind flashed from one end of the emotions to the other in swift relief. Now that Althea was safe, he was able to render tribute to the splendour of his own grief.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, "she won't die, then."

"Die, no! Fetch the doctor, and don't bother me any more."

Then, without another word, he departed on his errand.

## CHAPTER XXV

"WHO breaks pays." Althea, tended by Mrs. Dormer, spent the most wretched week of her life in the Hôtel de petit St. Pierre, "getting well." The hurt in her side, which the neglect of twenty-four hours had rendered troublesome, acting as a counter-irritant to her humiliated and wounded pride. She had flung self-respect on the spear points, and it was pierced in many places.

There comes, after defeat as well as after victory, the moment of moral stock-taking. In either case those are fortunate who find much worth advertising. But in most moral conflicts where the less unworthy souls are the combatants, pride becomes the ally of the will. The rebellious crew which man a woman's heart—if a bull be pardoned for the sake of the metaphor it rescues—were in revolt, and her will, dealing with them as a high-spirited skipper deals with a gang of mutinous sailors, strove to batten under hatches and starve into submission raging emotions which would have taxed the spiritual powers of little St. Peter himself.

She lay, after the first listless day, very quietly, with melancholy eyes fixed on the tall ceiling, seeking

a balance of comfort in which practical advantage might compensate for those heavy losses which her heart must pay. To gain the whole world but to lose its one glowing treasure seemed to her bankruptcy indeed. To her quick mind defeated hope appeared under many guises. She had, she told herself, tried to capture a man whom it was beyond her power to hold. A trumpet blew, a war-drum rolled across the Empire, and he passed out of her sight, beyond her sway, the bride of ambition. But although she had foreseen that this must be, yet her sorrow was none the less bitter, the tooth of disappointment none the less keen.

Gradually, however, she began to grope for consolations. There had been, she reflected, no hostile witness of her overthrow. She still had her bow and spear—beauty and youth, popular applause and wealth easily earned, gifts not to be despised because too weak to win a man whose whole life was aiming at another goal. If the mere waft of her luminous skirts, fluttering across the stage, had brought other men to her feet, why should she break her heart because she could detain only for a moment a would-be maker of Empires on the road to fame? Most of the men she had met were weak and contemptible, or futile dabblers on the fringes of the arts, but this man's strength lifted him to the ideal places in her heart. In what she deemed his greatness she found her own pardon.



## The Heart of the Dancer

But ah, that dismal week! She likened it to a dark bridge between the two disjointed fragments of her life.

Mrs. Dormer nursed her with an affectionate solicitude for which the patient was as grateful as the selfishness of regret allowed. The duenna's past blunders, now tacitly admitted, were forgotten. Her visible efforts of atonement were touching. She only once referred indirectly to Sancroft, already hurrying out to India amid the acclamations of the newspapers.

"However great your disappointment, my dear," she said, "the affection of a grim, stupid old woman is left. It is not worth much, perhaps, but a mother could hardly give more."

And in this clumsy effort of comfort, coming from one who never made pretty speeches, Althea found a certain dim sense of relief.

Meanwhile Ronald Dodd had fluttered round the Hôtel petit St. Pierre with a pertinacity which even Mrs. Dormer's rebuffs could not daunt.

"I wish to goodness you would go to your mamma at Cannes," she said contemptuously.

"I will go, on my honour I will," pleaded the poet, "if you will let me see her once."

After some further bullying she consented, but since she remained obdurately present throughout the interview, outwardly it was almost as unemotional as a meeting of directors in a bank parlour.

When he saw Althea with white face and thin, melancholy cheeks, sitting in an arm-chair in the gloomy *salon*, his conscience, which the poet had begun to lull to sleep the moment that he knew her hurt was slight, awoke and smote him again.

"I am going to my people at Cannes to-morrow," he commenced, "but I wanted to wish you good-bye first, and to say how sorry I am for—for—what has occurred."

Mrs. Dormer's presence froze the noble sentiments which otherwise he might have uttered, and he spoke like a repentant schoolboy.

"Please say no more about it," replied Althea. "You couldn't help it; it was quite an accident."

Irritable breathings were faintly heard from the corner, where the duenna sat pretending to read the *Figaro*.

"But there's one thing I ought to say," resumed Althea. "The whole thing must be kept a secret. No one knows of it except Mrs. Dormer, myself, and you."

"What, no one?" said the poet, who had heard of Sancroft's visit after his retreat.

"No one," repeated Althea firmly, "and as a paragraph in a newspaper it would be the most ridiculous mock tragedy imaginable, Mr. Dodd."

"You may trust me," he answered. "All I can say now is that I wish the bullet had struck me."

"And so do I!" interrupted Mrs. Dormer, unable

to keep silent under such provocation, "although heaven knows you would have made a pretty fuss over it! However, if this accident teaches you to be careful *about other things* besides fire-arms, Mr. Dodd, there is some hope that the lesson will not have been entirely wasted on you."

This broadside was followed by a painful silence, during which the angry, crestfallen poet rose and took his leave.

"I have to thank you for your great kindness, Miss Westbrooke," he said. "I shall also remember Mrs. Dormer's extreme—eh—magnanimity."

With that parting shaft he withdrew.

"Why *will* you always offend him?" asked Althea. "Offend him!" replied Mrs. Dormer, "he ought to be whipped."

Althea sighed wearily, and so the subject ended.

A few days later they returned to London.

"What a holiday!" thought Althea sadly, as she stepped into the boat at Calais. "What a holiday!"

The east wind was churning the grey-backed channel swell into foam-flecked vicious seas; England across the stormy straits was a faint shadow against a chill horizon.

She returned to her old life an altered woman, with a widened knowledge of life. Hitherto her art had dis severed her from reality; her successes had been built out of the emotions to which she appealed. But the waves had flung her against fact, and she

found it a rock. Sancroft had given her a lesson with a simple interpretation.

"Henceforth," she thought, "nothing shall tempt me from my purpose."

The purpose of which she was growing conscious was to grasp the highest rewards of her splendid gifts.

In a week or two she was at work again at the Empyrean. Having gone so far it was easy for her to go further.

It chanced that a new manager had been appointed, who had an artist's eye for original effects. To him Althea suggested Matthew Arnold's poem "Philomela" as a subject.

"Hark ! ah, the nightingale—  
The tawny-throated !  
Hark, from the moonlit cedar what a burst !  
What triumph ! hark !—what pain !"

Out of these and the following lines, with the aid of Ovid and of classical legend, a remarkably scenic drama grew.

Althea with all her energy flung herself into the work. The rehearsals lasted for six weeks; the songs and dances, the effects of light and shade wrought into a harmonious whole, acquired extreme symmetry and beauty. Produced in the middle of April, the success of "Philomela" was very great, and in the main due to Althea, whom all London flocked to see.

## The Heart of the Dancer

It seemed that fate which had humiliated her on one side desired to compensate her on another, and although the shaft still adhered to the wound, the completeness of her professional triumph deadened its smart.

It was at the beginning of May, when "Philomela" was in full swing, and Althea, with

"Lone Daulis and the high Cephissian vale"

as a background, was nightly undergoing "the feathery change," maintaining the illusion with extraordinary skill and sympathy, that the Duchess of Southshire thought good to take her up again, although Althea was unaware that she had been dropped. Her Grace, who considered her patronage essential as a moral support to people distinguished in letters, the arts, or the drama, was from want of observation accustomed to bestow her favours when they were too late to be of material service.

At Nutfield in the autumn Althea had been considered worthy of countenance, but when, soon after the new year, a rumour reached her that Colonel Sancroft was dangerously attracted by Miss Westbrooke, the Duchess decided to recall her gift.

Colonel Sancroft was the Duke's god-son; her Grace, who had views for him in which no public actress or singer could possibly be concerned, naturally resented any interference with the course of events which she had pre-ordained. Sancroft's de-

parture to India, however, induced the belief that there was nothing serious in it.

Althea, moreover, was for social purposes at that moment the most decorative young woman in the dramatic profession, and the Duchess wanted her. Forgiveness is never so easy as when convenient; consequently one afternoon when Althea was at home, to her astonishment and the delight of her visitors, her Grace of Southshire actually sailed into the room.

Had Juno, drawn by her peacocks, descended from high Olympus to join a group of Arcadian shepherds gossiping during the noontide heat under the wide shade of a beech tree, the joy of those happy mortals would have been not dissimilar. Mr. Ethelbert Ryder, editor and proprietor of that influential magazine, *The Tulip*, Hubert Fronder, the farce-writer, Miss Fantine St. Claire Everton, Althea's understudy, and two or three minor celebrities scattered about the room, eating sandwiches and talking theatrical scandal, were thrilled and dazzled.

"My dear Miss Westbrooke," said the Duchess (who never did things by halves), shaking hands, "what an age since we met!"

Then, having glanced round the room to ascertain whether there was anyone there whom she ought to know, she accepted a cup of tea and sat down.

"Yesterday," said the Duchess, settling herself comfortably, "I had the pleasure of seeing you in

'Philomela.' I was perfectly charmed, so was the Duke. I felt that I must congratulate you. The Duke assures me—and his experience is wide—that nothing so refined and poetical has appeared on the stage in his time."

While Althea was expressing modest gratification, Mr. Fronder recklessly rushed in.

"I am very pleased to hear his Grace's opinion," said the farce-writer, speaking as one with authority, "for it entirely coincides with my own."

"Indeed!" said the Duchess, in a voice suggesting that the value of the ducal opinion was by no means increased by such an endorsement.

"Mr. Fronder," said Althea, by way of excuse, "is the author of 'Little Johnnie,' now running at the Frolic Theatre."

"A farce?" asked the Duchess.

"Light comedy with a farcical vein," said its author.

"Ah," replied the Duchess, "I fancy I have heard of it; but I never go to see farces."

The Duchess, who remembered as many things as most people forget, rightly associated Mr. Fronder's name with certain troubles in the Divorce Court. A clean bill of moral health was necessary for the professional people destined to enjoy the privilege of her patronage, and she had decided that he was not a person to be encouraged.

"Have you heard or seen anything of our Nutfield

friends, Miss Westbrooke?" she resumed, turning half a shoulder on Mr. Fronder.

Althea had heard nothing, but believed that they had but lately returned from the Continent.

"Or of the—ch—Falconoke people?"

"No," said Althea, without flinching, "not since Colonel Sancroft started for India."

"One of our most distinguished soldiers, Colonel Sancroft," said Mr. Ryder, of *The Tulip*, who had been waiting for his opportunity.

The Duchess glanced at him, and resumed :

"As I told Sir Rupert, there are few officers of his son's age with such a record."

"That is very true," observed Mr. Ryder. "It is strongly brought out in an article which Captain Mackenzie, who served under Colonel Sancroft in the last campaign, has contributed to the forthcoming number of *The Tulip*."

There was no society in the world in which the editor of *The Tulip* felt that he could allow himself to be passed over as a person of no account—a position which his general appearance seemed to claim. To avoid mistakes, he constantly waved *The Tulip* over his head.

"Ah, *The Tulip*," said the Duchess, interested. "I read it sometimes, but I never agree with its views on the subject of the education of girls, which, as you know, is *my* subject."

Mr. and Mrs. Ryder looked disappointed.



## The Heart of the Dancer

"*The Tulip* is open to all views," said the editor. "And if your Grace will send us an article, say on the training of girls in relation to domestic life, we shall be greatly honoured. It is a subject, I know, to which your Grace has devoted much valuable study. It is also one on which the public stands badly in need of enlightenment."

The Duchess was pleased, and accepted the invitation for her first spare moment.

"It makes my flesh creep to hear fellows like Ryder toadying scribbling aristocrats for their twaddling 'copy,'" whispered the indignant farce-writer to Miss Fantine St. Claire Everton, who made a little movement of her hands and eyes closely copied from one of Althea's pretty gestures, which might be interpreted as an assent.

The discussion on domestic economy having ended, the Duchess again turned to Althea.

"Oh, Miss Westbrooke," she said, "I knew there was something else that I wanted to say. A great friend of mine, the Prince of Monteverro, who was in our box at the Empyrean last night, was perfectly enthusiastic over your performance. In fact, I promised to introduce you to him. He will be at my reception on Friday week, to which I hope you will come. I believe my secretary has already sent you a card."

Monteverro was a name to conjure with. The Prince, a nobleman of great wealth, a cousin to several

reigning families, and the most ardent Anglomaniac in all Italy, threw across Althea's drawing-room a proud shadow which well became the portly presence of the Duchess.

Althea thanked the Duchess prettily, and soon after her Grace departed, the other callers following in their turn in her majestic wake, Mr. and Mrs. Ryder being the first to depart.

"Charming woman the Duchess," said the proprietor of *The Tulip*, who felt he had done an excellent stroke of business; "so glad to have met her, Miss Westbrooke! We have many tastes in common. Good-bye; we've had a most pleasant afternoon."

When Mrs. Dormer, who, since her restoration to power, carefully avoided Althea's At Homes to escape the friction which they entailed, returned and heard of the extreme condescension of the Duchess, coupled with the name of Prince Monteverro, she was impressed.

"Her Grace means to make a princess of you, if she can," she said satirically.

Althea laughed—a little bitterly, too.

"Why not?" she said. "There have been worse ones in Italian history since the time of the Borgias, and after Philomela I'm ready for any part—the more illustrious the better. When I'm crowned you shall have a place at court."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Dormer; "but I think I should prefer to retire on a pension."

## CHAPTER XXVI

AN invitation to a reception at Southshire House was an honour dear to the social pride of the profession, and infrequently vouchsafed. It was conferred only on stars of undimmed lustre, whose characters were untouched by calumny—a danger which Mrs. Dormer felt that Althea had narrowly escaped.

The invitations were from ten till one, and Althea, after a protracted wrangle with the manager, was allowed to entrust the part of Philomela for that evening to the eager Miss St. Claire Everton.

It is in the power of the great to bestow pleasure at the cheapest rate. Mrs. Dormer, whom the world usually carefully overlooked, was, to her wonder, "honoured" with an invitation.

"I am aware," she said to Althea, "that the Duchess has only asked me because she thinks a chaperon looks well for you; still, it was a kind act, and one worthy of a great lady."

Among Mrs. Dormer's few weaknesses was a lofty estimate of the merits of great ladies. It was, however, due to no snobbish instincts on her part, but rather to the gratification which she derived from

seeing one of her own sex in the enjoyment of something resembling absolute power. She rose to the occasion, purchased a new black silk brocaded dress with a V-shaped bodice, and, for once scorning economy, entrusted her faded locks to the hands of a skilful *coiffeur* for decoration.

"It is ridiculous, I know," she thought; "but I don't want Althea to be ashamed of me."

"If I've made myself look a fool," she said to Althea, "it's in a good cause. But somehow I never try to soften myself down without feeling more than ever like a female warder in a reformatory."

"That's only because I'm a criminal," replied Althea. "But how do I look?"

As she spoke she pirouetted in half derision under the shaded light of an electric lamp, whilst her beautiful costume of silks, delicate lace, and pearls throbbed and fluttered like the plumage of a lovely bird preparing for flight.

"Look?" said Mrs. Dormer, who never flattered, "why, rather nice."

"Only rather?"

"Quite nice."

"Any criticism?"

"H'm, no. Perhaps you are too like an exotic."

"Like an exotic! But I am one—a rare product of the stage and the milliner."

"Whatever you are, you'll 'do' all right," said Mrs. Dormer, buttoning the sixth and last button of a

black glove on a sinewy arm. "But come on; it's time to start."

A few minutes later their brougham fell in rank behind a long line of carriages, and in its turn entered the wrought iron gates of Southshire House. The great hall was already crowded; the wide marble staircase almost blocked by the stream of ascending guests. The rustle, glitter, the murmur, and the heavy scents of the flowers seemed afloat on the stream of music made by the stringed instruments of a famous Austrian band. Wherever Althea moved whispers followed her progress.

"That's Althea Westbrooke—'Philomela,' you know." "Ah! but I've only seen her in 'Voltigia.'"  
"Isn't she lovely!"

Mrs. Dormer heard and said to herself, "No wonder she's spoilt!"

Their names were passed on to the top of the stairs, where the Duchess, in black velvet and diamonds, received her guests.

"How do you do, Miss Westbrooke; I'll see you later on. I have a lot to say. How do you do, Mrs. Dormer—delighted to see you!"

"She knew my name!" thought the gratified duenna. "Now, if she had been a grocer's wife she wouldn't have carried it in her head a minute. Give me great ladies, if you please!"

They passed through the first reception room, hung

with old pictures by mighty masters, on into a smaller drawing-room, where Sybil Dodd and her father were standing near the door, watching the arriving throng.

There are some meetings which resemble the impact of two adverse currents, each bearing fragments fallen from a crumbling glacier; the waters mingle but the floating ice crashes and grinds.

Sybil suspected Althea of trying to win Colonel Sancroft, but whatever the understanding between them may have been, she believed that her rival's efforts had been fruitless. That all women should admire Colonel Sancroft seemed to her perfectly natural, but it did not prevent jealousy from freezing all her former cordiality for Althea.

On his side Sir Francis had been watching recent events from a distance. He suspected that his son was on the list of Miss Westbrooke's rejected admirers, and had come to regard her as a brilliant adventuress whose gifts rendered her a serious danger to families afflicted with susceptible sons. Still, it was politic, he thought, to treat her with deference—especially amid such august surroundings—and he advanced to meet her with his most amiable smile. Miss Dodd's altered face and the effort of Sir Francis to attain outward cordiality were not lost on Althea. They had been kind to her at Nutfield; their hidden resentment now chilled her, and a sense of her discomfort was visible in her eyes. But she

knew that she had earned it, and meant to bear it with fortitude.

Sir Francis advanced and shook hands.

"Sybil and I saw you in your new piece on Wednesday night," said he, as they shook hands. "It is so classical, so reminiscent of the Greek legend—if I may be permitted to say so—that it carries one into Arcadia at once. We were much delighted!"

"I am very glad indeed that you were pleased," said Althea, glancing at Sybil, who, standing behind her father, never raised a white glove in greeting.

"Yes," said Sybil icily, "we liked it very much."

"Even if a girl can't help being jealous," thought Mrs. Dormer, grasping the situation, "it's a mistake to show it. But Miss Dodd's ever so much nicer than her brother."

And so for once she was tempted to speak without an introduction.

"I know your brother, Miss Dodd," said Mrs. Dormer, somewhat to her own surprise.

Sybil looked at her, noticed that she had a slight moustache, and looked honest.

"Then," she said, "you must be Mrs. Dormer."

"If you know my son," said Sir Francis, "then you know a most erratic youth. As I often tell him, it would have been wiser to take up ballooning than poetry in an age of pure materialism."

"Only not so safe," said Mrs. Dormer.

"Morally much safer," insisted Sir Francis. "But here come the Duchess and Prince Ferdinand."

The group moved from the doorway at their approach.

"Ah, Miss Westbrooke," said the Duchess, "I want to introduce you to Prince Ferdinand of Monteverro."

The Prince bowed more after the manner of young Oxford than old Italy, whilst Althea curtsied low, with a grace that had often charmed her audience to recall her before the curtain for the mere pleasure of seeing it repeated.

She took in the Prince at a glance. He was slight of build ; his small dark moustache was curled up coquettishly ; above his white temples his dark hair was already growing thin. His mouth was well modelled, his lips were red, and his eyes bright and singularly alert.

Connected by marriage with several of the great families of Southern Europe, the house of Monteverro was among the most ancient in Northern Italy, although the tide of events had obliterated from the map the principality which gave them their name. But they were still a great family, although all that remained of their craggy heritage and of the ancient hill-built cities which still piously honoured their names, was the beautiful estate of Monteverro, and the marble quarries, for the last two hundred years the chief source of their wealth.



Prince Felice Monteverro, Ferdinand's father, imbued with the modern spirit, had married the daughter of an American multi-millionaire, whose wealth and energy restored the dwindling fortunes and prestige of the family.

Prince Felice died when his son was a lad of ten, and a year later his mother, after a prolonged struggle with her husband's relatives and the clerical forces behind them, dismissed Fernando's priestly tutor, and placed him under the charge of a youthful Oxford Master of Arts. At the age of eighteen the Prince, who had been trained in an atmosphere of Anglomania, elected of his own accord to go up to Christchurch, but at the end of his second year, on his mother's death, he took his name off the books, and, abandoning culture, devoted himself to sport as it presents itself in the eyes of an Anglicised Italian noble. But even the reputation of being one of the best pigeon-shots in Europe would not have satisfied his ambition had not his success as a racing man crowned his reputation on the turf in England. In the preceding year his horse Capulet, bred on his own estate at Monteverro, had won the Oaks, and he now found himself, at the age of thirty, a bachelor prince with no new smart worlds to conquer, the victim of an obscure form of life-weariness more nearly resembling the satiety of petty Oriental monarchs than the boredom of a man who has sniffed the superior atmosphere of Christchurch.

"It's only my Yankee blood that keeps me going at all," the Prince used to say. "My mother had a theory that the blood of the New World was intended to keep that of the old one from stagnation, and, by George! I believe she was right."

The Prince spoke English with what gentlemen from Aberdeen call "the Oxford accent"; coming from a man whose ancestor assisted the Florentines to put the Pisans in their places, it surprised you.

But when a man, from the age of nineteen to that of thirty, has fed greedily on the "fat things," which a stern Scotch teacher tells us "the devil prepares for his elect," his appetite for them is naturally cloyed, although not usually so cloyed as he believes. Having lost the control of his vices, he finds himself swept away by the first fresh emotion that blows on him from no matter what cave of unholy winds. Behind the veneer of stoicism acquired by English training and American parentage were tyrannous atavisms due to his Italian ancestry, which, without measuring costs, said, "That which I will that must I have."

The little Prince had seen Althea in "Philomela," and now could see nothing else. The Duchess of Southshire's eye was keen. She had beheld similar enthusiasm in young Englishmen produce startling surprises—matrimonial—and other. The Prince, after all, was a foreign prince; there were in Italy at least a dozen cousins with the same title, although

destitute of its other appanages. A Monteverro, in the eyes of an English duchess, shines with a very different lustre to that of the minor British Royal Highnesses to whom it is a privilege to curtsy. Moreover, this particular Prince, she believed, had misspent his youth as she understood most continental youths of the upper classes were accustomed to misspend it, and this past, with the ugly whispers clinging to it, precluded him, in her eyes at least, from any claim to marry into an English family of lofty distinction, although it was an honour which she felt might have been thrust upon him 'long ago, had he not almost ostentatiously looked the other way when he saw it coming.

But although Prince Ferdinand might not be a suitable match for one of the Duke's own innocent nieces, yet her Grace considered that he would make a most excellent husband for a popular actress. This idea grew in proportion to the young man's admiration, and the Duchess decided to encourage it even to the extent of giving Althea a hint of the honour possibly in store for her if she would play her cards properly.

Revolving such things in her mind, like Juno in the *Æneid*, her Grace stood among her guests beholding many things. She saw Prince Ferdie, as they called him at Oxford, talking to Althea with an eagerness which showed that his Italian blood had, for the

moment, conquered both American parentage and English training.

"You never know," she thought, "what will come up. These mixed breeds are never to be relied on."

Next her eyes fell on Althea's beautiful chestnut head. There was no denying it. The young woman was of a type which drives even the best men to make fools of themselves. Her Grace feared that even her favourite, Gerald Sancroft, had not escaped without leaving some of his feathers behind.

And thus, while her guests murmured around her and the band played Chopin, the Duchess mused, conversing occasionally quite lucidly through the meshes of her own reflections.

In its turn Mrs. Dormer's face came under scrutiny.

"She looks," thought the Duchess, "a practical sort of woman—one to be trusted, and not likely to presume because one takes notice of her."

Mrs. Dormer was still talking to Sybil Dodd, cautiously, as the situation required, but not suspiciously.

The Duchess of Southshire caught a young man and introduced him to Miss Dodd, and then made a condescending swoop on Mrs. Dormer.

"A nice girl Miss Dodd," said the Duchess, glancing after Sybil.

"Very, indeed," replied Mrs. Dormer.

"I had an idea," resumed the Duchess, "that she was a great friend of Miss Westbrooke."

"They rarely meet now," replied Mrs. Dormer, slightly on the defensive.

"It must have been the brother I was thinking of, then."

"Ah," thought the duenna, who had even dodged interviewers, "she wants to pump me about Althea." She was not surprised, for she had rather expected it.

"Mr. Ronald Dodd wrote a piece for Althea," she answered. "That brought them a good deal together."

"Rather a—eh—fascinating young lady for a youth, especially a poet, to collaborate with."

"Not if the young man is sensible."

"But they never are, Mrs. Dormer."

"But Althea is—almost always."

The qualification weakened the assurance, but Mrs. Dormer only sacrificed the truth in desperate cases.

"There are, then, moments of weakness, eh?" suggested her Grace, with a faint pucker of her brows and a movement of her head that in a matron of less exalted station might have been described as roguish.

"Althea is only twenty - seven," replied Mrs. Dormer. "For the last six years the public has put her on a pedestal and fed her on flattery."

"And of course her pretty head has been turned a little," said the Duchess. "But she owes a great deal to you, Mrs. Dormer."

Mrs. Dormer was flattered.

"Of course I've done my best. Perhaps your Grace has heard that they call me the duenna?"

"I have heard that when admirers are riotous you rout them," said the Duchess, smiling.

"She has absolutely no one but myself to look after her," said Mrs. Dormer.

"She could have no one better fitted for a task of some difficulty," said her Grace pleasantly, an opinion which, since it coincided with Mrs. Dormer's own view, increased her respect for the perspicacity of the Duchess. "I take great interest in Miss Westbrooke," resumed the Duchess; "but I must say that a certain rumour which reached me coupling her name with that of Colonel Sancroft caused me some uneasiness."

Mrs. Dormer's eyebrows twitched.

"That's all over now," she said.

"It made the Duke uneasy, too," resumed the Duchess. "Gerald Sancroft is his godson, you know, and at one moment he thought of writing him a letter."

"And did he?" asked the duenna eagerly.

"No, the Commander-in-Chief spared us the pain of protesting. The Colonel was ordered to India. But I am glad to have your assurance that there is nothing in it. For I need not tell you, Mrs. Dormer, that a rising soldier in the position of Colonel Sancroft is not in a position to make matrimonial experiments."

"Althea knows that," said Mrs. Dormer, beginning to feel uncomfortable lest her candour should induce her to say too much.

The Duchess glanced to the corner of the room where Monteverro was talking to Althea with an ardour that showed that his Italian temperament was still dominant.

"Of course," said she, "there is no reason why your friend Miss Westbrooke should not make a brilliant marriage. I can, I perceive, Mrs. Dormer, confide in you without committing an indiscretion. Prince Ferdinand admires Miss Westbrooke enthusiastically. Look at him. He is actually hanging on her words. He has £35,000 a year, and there are still the makings of a man in him, if a clever young woman would undertake him. But I have said more than enough, and I'm sure you will consider that it has been said in confidence. Now, Mrs. Dormer, if you could induce Miss Westbrooke to sing, all my guests will be deeply indebted to you."

Then Mrs. Dormer, glad to escape from a conversation from which she had conscientiously exiled her candour, walked across the room and said to Althea :

"The Duchess wishes me to ask you to sing."

"Oh, do, Miss Westbrooke!" exclaimed the Prince.

"What shall I sing, Aunt Dormer?" said Althea.

"Your aunt?" said the Prince, with a quick glance and a slight bow towards Mrs. Dormer.

"By adoption, yes," said Althea.

"Better known as Miss Westbrooke's duenna," said Mrs. Dormer curtly.

"Your duties must be full of excitement," said the Prince, glancing oddly at the black-browed lady frowning at him.

"As bad as a policeman's!" replied Mrs. Dormer. "Sing 'Voltigia,' Althea."

"Have you ever heard me in 'Voltigia'?"

"No, unfortunately. I have only seen you as 'Philomela,' and I shall see you again in that to-morrow. So please give us 'Voltigia.'"

Althea spoke a few words to the Duchess, and in a moment or two the whisper spread across the crowded rooms that she was to sing. A grand piano was moved to the centre of the room; two violins and a pianist were pressed from the band, and a great circle was formed. The dance which on the stage filled up the spaces between the verses was impossible, but Althea sang with all her soul. Prince Monteverro, who had an Italian's love for sensuous melody, stood rapt beside the Duchess, with two little spots of colour on his pale cheeks and fire in his eyes.

Althea's singing dispelled languor as a lark awakes the life of a meadow in spring. The audience, lifted out of itself by the swift enchantment of her voice, forgot even its extreme smartness in its acute pleasure, and applauded with unrestrained approval and delight.



"And that's an Englishwoman!" exclaimed Prince Ferdinand, with sparkling eyes.

"As a matter of fact, I believe she is Welsh," said the Duchess, as the Duke of Southshire, whom the singing had brought on the scene, advanced, and said many gracious things to Althea, smiling benignly the while, like the amiable nobleman he was.

"Whatever she is," said the Prince, "Miss Westbrooke has made me understand what the darkness feels when the nightingale sings."

Althea, moving through the congratulatory throng, had now reached the Duchess.

"Thank you, Miss Westbrooke, for lifting our heavy feet off the dull earth for a moment," said the Duchess, who loved music, and felt it. "Prince Ferdinand has paid your singing the most touching homage."

"Please tell me what it was," said Althea, enjoying the effect her voice had produced, as all sincere artists must.

"The Prince said that you made him understand what the dark feels when the nightingale sings. Is not that a charming compliment?"

"It's a simple fact," said the Prince. "Ah! Miss Westbrooke, you should hear our nightingales at Monteverro in May, when the gardens are heavy with scents, and the darkness with song, and you wouldn't laugh at me."

And the Prince spoke and looked as a man who had never been bored in all his life. The Duchess, who knew him well, noting the change, was full of wonder.

## CHAPTER XXVII

THE Prince of Monteverro called on Althea Westbrooke on the day on which the news of Colonel Sancroft's brilliant victory reached London. The achievement was full of the romance which surrounds successful military exploits in remote and inaccessible regions.

The campaign had spread itself out into a bewildering and seemingly meaningless series of marchings and counter-marchings in the vain effort to overtake an ever-vanishing enemy. Whatever losses and checks there had been, the Queen's troops had incurred. The newspapers were grumbling, the Service Clubs sneering at official mismanagement, the foreign press amiably predicting disaster as the result of military incapacity, and the public, which regards punitive expeditions against savages foes in much the same light as international football, was beginning to doubt the wisdom with which the teams had been selected.

For more than a week a flying column, commanded by Colonel Sancroft, had lost touch with the main forces of the expedition, and there had existed grave anxieties as to its fate, not only among the Fleet

Street military experts, but at the War Office itself, where the authorities held their peace, and trusted to luck.

"No news of Colonel Sancroft's column," was becoming a constant head-line in the papers, when one morning a message flashed from the mouth of the Khyber Pass chronicling another brilliant feat of British arms beyond the stormy Indian frontier.

The well-chosen expedition of picked troops, native and British, had by forced marches surprised the tribesmen in a valley where, beside a famous shrine, there dwelt a holy man who, like Kubla Khan "heard ancestral voices prophesying war." The fight had been sharp and fierce, the unlucky *mollah* fell amid a group of fugitives, swept out of existence by the whiff of a machine gun, the British flag waved over the loop-holed mud fort riddled by shell fire, and Colonel Sancroft wrote his despatches under the gnarled mulberry tree under which the prophet himself had once sat.

Althea Westbrooke thrilled with admiration as she read the stirring story of a victory which she knew removed the victor still farther out of her reach.

Sancroft had permitted himself to be adored for a brief space, and then he had marched straight out of her life without looking back, leaving her a mere incident in his life, to be remembered, perhaps, with regret in sentimental musing—that was all.

Yet she gloried in his success. His fame was the

excuse for her past folly. "At least I chose a king," she reflected sadly.

Her table was strewn with newspapers. All showed how deeply Sancroft's deed had stirred the country.

She took up the *Times* and read:—"Few events in the history of our race in India have equalled in intrepidity and soldierly resource Colonel Sancroft's daring march, and the splendid victory in which it culminated. Henceforth his name must be permanently added to the list of Englishmen on whose undaunted energy and heroism the British Empire has been built up."

And so on for a column. There was incense enough to gratify the greediest ambition.

But just as Sancroft had drawn aside the *purdah*—the curtain hiding this remote centre of tribal fanaticism from unbelieving eyes, so it seemed that he had dragged aside the *purdah* of her heart, entering there for a moment, as an invader too proud to linger in so poor a citadel. Her own humiliation, it seemed to her, resembled that of the out-generalled, surprised, and slaughtered tribesmen who had defied the British *raj*, and now, trampled under foot by the inexorable power they had provoked, were about to pay the penalty in smuggled rifles and meagre Indian rupees. Even that day was the day fixed for the greybeards of the people to render homage to their conqueror under the very tree whose boughs had shaded the half-sane priest preaching his holy war!

But just as Sancroft stood in that remote green valley shut in by gaunt mountain ranges, holding in his hand the fortunes of the tribe, so as a conqueror he seemed to stand in her heart. Fate in one case was as relentless as in the other. Sometimes at night she awoke and wept, half in shame for what she had lost, half in regret for what she had given. But now the time had come when she must make terms, when her indemnity must be paid. Her heart must be wrung till no taint of her folly remained. The pride which this man alone had lowered must be restored by other homage to the inner dignity which it had lost. But how? She threw down the newspaper and remembered that the Prince was coming.

Life presented itself to her in its dramatic form—the shape which, by a process of exclusion, most hides us from ourselves—whether she looked back to Sancroft and his fame or forward to the coming of the Prince. Not indeed

“A fairy prince with joyful eyes  
And lighter-footed than the fox,”

yet still a princeling of an ancient name, and not to be despised, with a palace in Rome, another in Florence, and an ancestral villa among the Apennines, and one whom she alone—for so the story had reached her, and intuition confirmed it—had been able to stir from his indifference. For the Duchess's hints had not been misunderstood.

The old legend, she thought, had been reversed. It was she who must wake the slumbering heart of the Prince. And then, as her unchecked fancy wandered through the doctrine of compensations, musing vaguely among shadows, suddenly the Prince of Monteverro walked into the room with expectancy in his eyes.

"Ah! you see I have availed myself of your permission," he said, smiling, and shaking her hand with fingers almost as slender as her own. "The darkness has come to the nightingale!"

"The Prince of Darkness," she said, smiling too.

"Yes, the Prince of Darkness if you like, but out of employment for the moment."

"What! is there no mischief left in the world to do?"

"Plenty," he said, "but having heard the nightingale, there's no fun in it. But I'm talking like a 'rotter'!"

After this relapse into the undergraduate, his eye fell on the little pile of newspapers which she had been skimming.

"London is full of news to-day. 'Great British Victory! Great British Victory!' I heard a man bawling it at ten o'clock this morning along Piccadilly. He was selling evening papers only two hours before noon. But the English are a great people; even the clock obeys their ha'penny journalists. But Colonel Sancroft, I believe, was a friend of yours, Miss Westbrooke?"

"Yes, an old friend," she said, perceiving one of the drifting rumours had floated his way.

"You must be proud of your friend."

"I am always pleased when they distinguish themselves."

"That sounds like a censure on idle people like myself," said the Prince, shaking his head playfully. "But certainly Colonel Sancroft is a fine soldier. I met a brother officer of his the other night, who told me that he was the only man he had ever met with whom soldiering was an absolute passion."

"That is quite true," replied Althea.

"His friend said," resumed the Prince, "that he believed Sancroft would sacrifice anything on earth to professional ambition."

He paused to see the effect of his words on Althea, but none was visible.

"Perhaps some day," he went on, "we shall cease to place the warlike qualities at the top of the manly virtues. However, it's good to be ambitious. I was once. I determined to win the Derby and have my name placarded all over the civilised world. At last I succeeded. I was bursting with pride for six hours—felt 'divinity within me breeding wings,' you know. But a week later I didn't care t'opence about it. Can you account for that, Miss Westbrooke?"

"Perhaps it was because you were cloyed with too much prosperity," said Althea.

"Good heavens! What an odd reason for want of



appreciation. You are classing me among the prize decadents."

"Never mind. I am one too."

"What, you, Miss Westbrooke! You are as full of life as a sea-breeze."

"As a Dead Sea breeze. All the clever people, all the artists, poets and painters, who are original are decadents. Isn't that the latest discovery of philosophy?"

"Yes, of quack philosophy in England and Germany, where the arts to the Latin races always seem a little out of place. But keep me off art or I shall talk nonsense. My excuse is that I have been studying a new one. I have been to see you every night since we met at the Duchess of Southshire's, and I am no nearer understanding you than ever. I wish I could read you. I want to know what thought lies behind your eyes when you sing and the whole theatre listens, when you dance and the heart of the audience dances too. It is the fable of Orpheus and Eurydice reversed—you lead the dull crowd out of hell. I am the Prince of Darkness, so you named me, and you have led me out."

The Italian was rapidly conquering the restraining elements within him.

"Can't you tell me what you feel and think," he continued, "there, on the stage, in front of the massed dark audience, singing and dancing like a happy soul released from a dull body? The very

tricks of light and shade shot from the wings, which with anyone else would seem cheap, grow mysteries when they touch your robes. Tell me what you feel and think!"

"Perhaps I feel when it is all over much as you felt twenty-four hours after your horse had won the Derby."

"What! hungry for something out of your reach? Why, you ought to be the happiest woman in England!"

"Every year I am less happy. First of all, I sang for bread, then for fame, now I am struggling to retain my hold. In a year or two the artifices will all be stale. When the house applauds these are the warnings which keep my vanity in check. The only enduring triumphs are those of creative art. They at least defy time; my triumphs are coloured bubbles afloat for a moment in the limelight. It was because I can't forget this, when I ought only to remember to be grateful to the public which admires and the managers who pay me, that I class myself among the decadents, *Monsieur le Prince*! The truth is we both want starving into a wholesome mood."

Althea was half sincere, and only dimly conscious that she was trying her mood on a man whose own temperament, fed on artificialities, exposed him to the morbid effects of such sympathy.

"Who is happy, then," he asked, "if you are not?"

"Only the 'meek and lowly of heart' who have

not learnt to measure the world by the beating of their own pulse!"

Then all the youth that remained in the young Prince sprang up in his heart. In a moment more he would have been at her feet, exclaiming that he alone in the world was capable of making her happy, but the demure entry of the servant with tea brought them back to the complacent surface of things, and Mrs. Dormer, following it, kept them floating there.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

A FOREIGN prince of much wealth, free from rococo suspicions, who has been educated at Oxford, who has acquired a veneer of comfortable English prejudices, and who has won a Derby, is naturally a vivid incentive to that form of gossip which the efforts of the press to meet the demands of popular education have so amply provided. Consequently the Prince became the prey of the paragraphist. Whether he drove Miss Westbrooke and a distinguished party on his drag to Sandown, or entertained her and other guests of distinction at dinner at the latest fashionable restaurant, the incident was chronicled for all it was worth.

For this time no one grudged rumour its power of circulation. Every one who went to the Empyrean knew why Prince Ferdinand retained a private box. Whenever he showed himself whispers fluttered from the stalls to the promenade, thence to the American bars and the upper circle, and so on, by degrees, to the gallery, where it mixed with the smell of beer and rank tobacco.

Rumour assumed many forms. Althea was to marry the Prince ; there were cynical contradictions

which denied his serious purpose ; there were even wise youths who insisted that a morganatic marriage had already been celebrated.

The Duchess, meanwhile, looking on from the secure serenity of her station, and awaiting the accomplishment of her will, sent for Mrs. Dormer, and said to her :

“ They are making themselves very conspicuous. You know my views, and I think it is now time that something were done.”

But Mrs. Dormer, who, as an intervener in Althea’s affairs, had at last learnt discretion, failed to see how she could advance matters, and said so.

“ You must make Miss Westbrooke understand the necessity of bringing an erratic but well-meaning young man to the point,” said the Duchess. “ I will undertake to school the Prince.”

Then the Duchess gave her tea and sent her away full of pride in the new alliance. In dealing with Althea’s affairs Mrs. Dormer never had any one to help her before. Now she had a Duchess ! Providence for once seemed prodigal in assistance.

As free from snobbishness as it is possible for an honest British matron to be, Mrs. Dormer was elated in spite of herself.

With such backing she grew bold to the point of audacity, and, on the night following the afternoon of her interview with the Duchess of Southshire, did not hesitate to come to close quarters with Althea.

The Prince had begun to rain presents and bouquets on Althea with the lavishness of a prodigal temperament. It chanced that she was seeking an antique silver buckle for a waistband, and one day in Bond Street, after a futile shopping excursion in his company, she whispered her want.

"A buckle!" he said. "There's a beauty somewhere at Monteverro. It's attributed to Cellini. It's a sort of heirloom, and belonged to Bianca Cappello, who married Francesco dei Medici, or some other tragic heroine of Florentine history.

It was a parcel containing this piece of spoil from the treasures of Monteverro which gave Mrs. Dormer her opportunity.

"Here is something for you," said the watchful lady, who was first to see it as it lay in the lamplight with that air of promise which the princely seal suggested.

Althea, guessing its source, opened the packet, and found in an antique case a noble piece of silver-smith's artistry. Fantastic monsters were careering round the boss of the buckle; the magic fancy of the renaissance lurked in its wonderful design.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed. "And how kind! There is comfort in lovely things after all."

She handed it to Mrs. Dormer.

"Comfort! I should think so!" replied Mrs. Dormer. "Who sent it?"

"Prince Ferdinand, of course."

"Oh!"

"But isn't it lovely, Aunt Dormer?"

"Very. There is one rather like it in South Kensington. But when is this sending presents to end, Althea? And what does it mean?"

"I think I must leave you to guess, Aunt Dormer," replied Althea, with the air of a mock *ingénue*.

"You won't be cross with me, then, for saying what I think?"

Althea shook her head. "What delightful dragons!" This to the design on the buckle.

"Althea, you are greatly changed!"

"Am I? I had a ridiculous accident a short time ago. When a limb is damaged, Aunt Dormer, it works stiffly."

"You have brooded over the accident too long. I want you to forget it. If I read you aright, you are trying to. For I can't think that you have made yourself conspicuous with Prince Ferdinand for nothing. I'm not the only woman in London who thinks you might be a great lady if you cared. Your ambition is growing. The stage is ceasing to satisfy you."

Althea smiled oddly.

"I am prepared," she said, with affected humility, "for any station to which it shall please Providence to call me. Even to reign at—Timbuctoo!"

"At Monteverro, you mean!"

"Do I? Surely I am not so presumptuous! Be-

sides, I haven't been invited. And then, although this is a side of my character as yet unrevealed to you, I am a sort of female Cincinnatus. Even I dream sometimes of my plough."

"Your plough indeed! You would want for your ploughing an audience, and an orchestra in constant attendance. Listen to me, Althea! The public has talked of you and the Prince quite enough. It's time it stopped. It's a brutal way of putting it, but you can make him marry you if you like. You must either decide to do this or send him away as you did the others—or *nearly all* the others."

Althea faintly quivered.

"I like the Prince, and should be sorry if anything happened to frighten him away," she replied, in the same key of irony; "but I don't quite see the necessity for hurry."

"I do. You know how things are settling down in India."

"Yes, thanks to Colonel Sancroft."

"And of course *you* know that there are fresh honours in store for him. He'll be made a K.C.B., and all manner of things. It was all in yesterday's paper, and I saw you reading it. Of course, he will hurry home to be lionised again."

"Well, what if he does?"

"If he does," said Mrs. Dormer emphatically, "you are not to be trusted; that's all."

Althea flushed, and frowned for a moment,



## The Heart of the Dancer

"You mean," she said, "that I ought to marry Prince Ferdinand as a protection. The suggestion is quite unworthy of you, Aunt Dormer."

"But I want you to forget all about that man. Let him come back and find you the Princess de Monteverro."

"What! as a punishment? 'The stone which the builders rejected'! Is this good advice for a woman in need of chastening? Someone is making you worldly—very worldly. I believe it is the Duchess of Southshire. Don't shake your head; you can't deceive me! But now I'll go to bed and try—not to think it over. Heigho, I wish I were asleep! It's the best thing in life, sleep is. Good-night!"

But that night, instead of sleeping, Althea lay long awake, her thoughts fixed on the blood-stained valley where the man she had loved was lording it over the sullen, hook-nosed hillmen whose powers he had broken. But she fell asleep at last. When she awoke her mind seemed to have made itself up, as it sometimes does in the deepest sleep.

The next morning a special messenger conveyed a warmly-worded note to the great hotel where the Prince occupied a suite of appropriate rooms.

"I expect the Prince will be here this afternoon," said Althea.

"Indeed," said Mrs. Dormer, feeling that she had said enough.

But instead of going out to give wider scope to

Althea's manœuvre, Mrs. Dormer remained like a spy waiting in her room for the tinkle of the electric bell.

It came at last. She heard the Prince's voice at the door and his step in the corridor. When the drawing-room door closed upon him she took up her station on the threshold of the adjoining dining-room.

All was still in the flat save for the voices behind closed door. What were they saying?

Mrs. Dormer felt the excitement a mother feels in the presence of her daughter's noble wooer—for her the oddest of experiences.

She stood listening. Now the voice of the Prince rose with a certain sonorousness associated with repressed emotions, now she heard Althea's clear tones.

Then in a panic she feared that Althea was making some sort of confession.

"She can't be such a fool," she thought, in her eagerness forgetting her sense of justice. The past of either, she considered, might be left to bury its dead. No doubt the Prince's was full of ugly corpses. But Althea's was flecked with only one passing weakness. They could begin again so splendidly! Althea, with her powers of readjustment, was capable of ruling a kingdom—let alone an obscure principality which had dwindled to an historic estate!

The hour of the afternoon tea was past, and the door was still closed.

But at last it opened and Mrs. Dormer moved back

from the threshold of the dining-room, where hope and anxiety were holding her.

"Aunt Dormer," cried Althea, "come here please."

She hurried forth. The Prince was smiling cheerfully; Althea was pale.

"Aunt Dormer," said Althea. "The Prince of Monteverro has asked me to be his wife. I have explained to him that I do not consider myself worthy of the great honour which he has offered me—"

"Great honour!" interrupted the Prince. "Nonsense! My mother was an American, and I'm full of democratic instincts."

He laughed gladly.

"And so," resumed Althea, "I have consented."

"You darling!" cried Mrs. Dormer, springing into her arms. "You darling. God bless you!"

This last was the formula which she shot off when excited. Then she turned to Prince Ferdinard and shook hands.

"I think you are a very fortunate young man," she said.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Prince, "but you can't think me half so lucky as I think myself."

The Prince laughed again. Perhaps he was thinking of all his Italian relations, scattered across Italy from Milan to Naples, who had other views for him. Perhaps he remembered how fond they were of sitting in judgment on him, and contemplated, not

without malice, the shock his marriage with an actress would occasion.

But the Prince's laugh this time was "un-English" and pleased Mrs. Dormer less.

"Well! you have settled the business at any rate," she said.

"Yes, we've settled it," replied the Prince. "You see nothing to object to, I hope."

"Oh no, it seems quite reasonable. And now, Althea, I think I might ring the bell for tea."

"Do," said Althea.

And she rang the bell.

## CHAPTER XXIX

THE Prince of Monteverro desired that the marriage should take place as soon as possible, and that his engagement should in the meantime remain a secret. He was marrying to please himself, and desired to be spared the expostulations of the various branches of his family, until a sense of their uselessness should suggest to his kin the wisdom of limiting their volume.

Althea's engagement at the Empyrean ended on the 15th of June; on the morning of the 16th she was privately married to the Prince, according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. The few admitted to the secret had carefully kept it. No reporter was on the track until too late; even the suspicions of the Court milliner were scarcely aroused. The presence of the Duke and Duchess of Southshire at the ceremony gave it dignity and robbed it of its subterranean aspect.

"The fact is," said the Duchess when questioned, "I consider the marriage one of my making. In such matters I am most liberal-minded, and outside the British nobility I have no prejudice against a misalliance."

But the marriage caused a considerable flutter, and

the papers gushed considerably, and with more than their customary inaccuracy. With some it was the story of King Cophetua and the beggar-maid, with others an orange-blossom idyl, in which the brightest genius and the noblest chivalry were brought together.

And the news of the marriage spread itself over the world in illustrated papers, in knowing paragraphs, in society journals, and, for at least a fortnight, haunted the music and drama columns of all journals purveying theatrical gossip. The news of it reached Colonel Sancroft, high up among the sun-parched hills, where he was still exacting indemnities in rifles and rupees, and preaching to the sullen tribesmen the advantages of a timely submission.

In theory the marriage should have pleased him, but in practice it excited unreasoning resentment. For a whole day it plunged him in grim silence, and excluded all other thoughts from his mind ; then for six weeks he flung himself into his work of pacifying the district with an energy which would have driven nine men out of ten home on sick leave.

But of course he was not jealous. No man ever is. He had hesitated for a moment which way to leap, and to resent Althea's brilliant marriage was to regret his own power of withstanding temptation.

Still the marriage had made a change. It seemed to have pushed his pride aside, converted a hundred charming memories into a swarm of stinging desires.

## The Heart of the Dancer

The few weeks that he had spent in London, meeting her daily, was a brief pastoral in a strenuous life of labour. The soldier looked back to his first and only Capua with moments of longing, although he had marched out with beating drums and flying colours. But now that rosy bower was destroyed ; he could never enter it again. Like the shepherd he had let in the sirocco wind to his garden, and the wild boars had wallowed in his clear springs. Still he was not jealous, and called himself a maundering fool a dozen times a day. " It's a splendid thing for Althea," he insisted, " and she'll make a magnificent princess."

But the memory of her rode with him wherever his stout pony cantered in front of a line of troopers with fluttering lance pennons, casting black shadows on the scorched rocks. In that stern valley, with the eternal snow-peaks biting into the blinding blue, and the dust whirling along the arid water-courses whenever the hot wind stirred, her beauty shone on his reluctant senses with all the pent-up energies of contrast, distance, and absence. But she shone with the lustre of the thing which is lost. The grim-visaged tribesmen, the rank odours of their lairs, the endless *darbars*, the long hot day, the white moonlit nights with the howling of prowling village curs, or the cries of predatory jackals scratching among the shallow, newly-made graves, drove his thoughts to the woman he had left as a soldier leaves a pleasant bivouac. Foul things, ugly things, austere things, turned his

eyes home to the beautiful and brilliant woman who had loved him. At the bottom of his dull anger was the consciousness that the past happiness could never be repeated.

But Sancroft's was not the only complacency unseated by Althea's marriage. Ronald Dodd, who had clamoured before, now shook his puny and jealous fist at his own woes. He found a sympathetic listener in his friend Bagshott, lately back from South Africa, where a purposeless ambition had led him, and whence he had now returned with the usual crop of lost illusions and unnecessary magazine articles.

Much had happened since his departure, and the poet filled up the gaps with the history of himself, relating how busy the furies had been "combing out his soul for pastime."

"That woman might have loved me, Bagshott," he said, "for she appreciated my art as no woman ever appreciated it before, or will ever appreciate it again. You remember what she made of my 'Voltigia'!" But the savage which lies hidden in the breast of every woman, otherwise she would be a Sphinx, tore her after the drums and the trumpets, after the shoutings of the captains and the thunder. But she found it all noise—hollow noise—and now in despair or pique, or heaven knows what sibylline mutiny and rage, she has married this hybrid princeling—this Yankee Italian Monteverro, whose sole claim to fame is that



## The Heart of the Dancer

he once won a Derby. I am a poet; Sancroft is a soldier; but this man's horse won the Derby! The devil is about the world with a big pepper pot of irony. Nothing can escape the infernal sprinkling. And now Althea is a *Principessa*, with a string of painful memories behind her, a husband whom by force of comparison she must despise, and a palace in which her fluttering soul will die like a displanted passion flower. The footlights are behind, 'Voltigia' is behind her, and her triumphs and the applauding crowd. Picture it, Bagshott, picture it! But now she has sold her birthright for an empty title, and her glory has vanished for ever. For it is decreed that the stage shall know her no more! And after her she has dragged exotic fragments of my life. And thus for ever the dull pageant goes on. The vast abyss of convention swallows up all beautiful things. Truly 'the gods are hard to reconcile!' Art is but the shadow of the rainbow on the hill. Come, let us eat and drink, for we are morally dead already. Pass me the cognac and the cigarettes, and let the material things rule in a world of matter."

And the poet waved an empty liqueur glass in a shaky hand.

But the next day Sir Francis descended on his son and spoke his mind as a rising statesman accustomed to be heard in the House learns how.

"You are drinking too much, sir, smoking too much, sir, living too hard, sir, and 'giving yourself

away' too much, sir. There is neither moderation nor reason in you. You have made yourself a terrible idiot over this young woman, who, thank goodness, is now married and out of the way. You are worrying your mother, sir, and rapidly convincing me that I'm the father of a fool. Pull yourself together and be a man, or I'll stop your allowance and cut you out of my will."

But his son retorted with equal energy and greater originality in abuse, and his father withdrew in wrath far greater than the half-simulated anger which had brought him, and had not Sybil and Lady Dodd intervened the quarrel might have had disastrous consequences for the reckless poet.

But the sudden displacement of interests caused by an unexpected marriage in course of time finds a new level, and in a month or two those over whom the wave has swept recover from the shock. Every day must be lived through, work and play must be done, and the human back hardens itself to the scourge of circumstance, finding even compensations in the thickening of the integument or the pride of endurance.

Meanwhile Althea opened all her sail to meet the favouring breeze bearing her onward into untried social seas, like a beautiful adventuress bent on conquering, and it was as a conqueror that she planted her banners over the proud walls of Monteverro.

The great house, built by Michelozzo in the middle

of the fifteen century, delighted her. It was not till she first stood on the magnificent *loggia* and looked across the Tuscan landscape, so new, yet strangely familiar to her by pictures or dreams or childish impressions, that Althea fully realised the change. Her enthusiasm pleased her husband, whose pride of race smouldered under the polish of faintly ironical disparagement covering it.

"I only hope," said he, "that you won't be bored. There's an ancestral gloom hanging over this sort of place which the foreigner likes but the natives run away from. I never escaped the ghost till I went to Paris for the first time."

"Ghosts must be cherished, flattered, and soothed, and you'll find them most friendly spirits," replied Althea, smiling.

"Must they? In this very *loggia* a Monteverro murdered his wife, an Orsini, and, though she deserved it, the deed has left a spectre which needs a good deal of coaxing to make pleasant as well as picturesque. I remember my mother hated the story, and always tried to believe it was a legend."

Althea felt a faint chill in spite of the heat. The blood-thirsty mediæval past pressed so closely on the present at Monteverro. No wonder, she reflected, that a hybrid like the Prince should look elsewhere for his happiness. Was it not this contradictory element—the Anglo-American discipline set in an Italian atmosphere—that had driven him to her?

But this marriage, like his education, was an experiment. He had, he believed, found a prize among the ranging herd of women, and he had brought her to Monteverro as his great-grandfather, an enthusiastic horticulturist, had brought rare plants from the tropics to acclimatise on the sunny Apennine slope. And, just as old Prince Felice watched his camphor-trees taking root and sucking fragrance from the Monteverran soil, so did his grandson, as yet unconscious of cryptic jealousy, watch his wife expand in the stately home to which he had transplanted her. Her vivid admiration for her new life, her joy in its beauty and dignity, gave fresh pleasure to his own, and, for the first time since his mother's death, he was happy at Monteverro. He had inherited from her the delicate respect for women common to well-bred Americans, and his unfailing courtesy and kindness touched Althea as she made her way through the labyrinth of Monteverran politics, the complex web of cousinly relationship, and the pitfalls of the unsurveyed region through which she dexterously moved, dazzling it with her accomplishments.

She had expressed a strong wish to spend a whole year in Italy. If a son were born to her, as she hoped and expected, it were well he were born at Monteverro. Besides, there was so much to absorb her, and, now that her mind was set to her new environment, she desired, until the adjustment were perfected, to meet no English acquaintances.

"Let me be a Monteverro in something more than name," she said.

And the Prince replied :

"All right ! So you shall !"

Still, sometimes the austere beauty about her subdued her by its melancholy. It was so far from the footlights, and haunted by the whispers of an alien tradition whose perishing spirit sat and sighed among the green columns of the tall cypresses. The gardens were as full of mystery of the past as the tapestry on the great marble hall of the Palace. The wide terraces, fragrant with rare shrubs—mimosa, orange, magnolias, cedars, and magnificent oleanders—descended to the river and brought messages from beyond the sunrise of memory.

The river, too, was mystical : after rains a raging torrent, but in summer droughts a trickling brook dribbling down the steep scar former fits of rage had torn in the bosom of the valley. Beyond its tumbled boulders, fringed with delicate fern and tiny mosses, stretched the pathetic Tuscan landscape, in art grown into a tradition, dotted with fig and olive orchards, vineyards and patches of maize, and slumbering beneath a sense of infinite antiquity and human mystery.

From the world of the stage Althea had moved into a land of dream, where her quick soul absorbing new impressions made them a defensive part of her experience. The servants, who in secret had resented her

coming as a foreigner, heretic, and interloper, soon became her humble friends; and even the Prince's uncle the Cardinal ceased to hate her after he had heard her sing.

And thus for several months they lingered at Monteverro without seeing an English friend. Since it was her destiny to be an Italian princess, she was determined to play the part grandly. The Prince's many kinsmen, who naturally desired to impress on their dear cousin the Principessa, a due sense of her own inferiority, were baffled and routed, to the extreme satisfaction and pride of her husband. Her beauty, her courage, her lavish gifts swept aside the feeble obstacles—jealousy of race, or prejudice of creed—spread in her path, as the wind tossed the fallen leaves from the garden walks when the first autumn cold came down from the mountain.

When the keen winds from the Apennines swept the valley which the roaring river filled with clamour, the household removed to the Prince's residence at Florence on the Lung'arno. In the following spring they returned to Monteverro, and, when the terraced walks were full of odours, the gardens of roses, and the nightingale sang to the darkness, Althea's son was born.

## CHAPTER XXX

THERE are women, and even the most accomplished, of whom motherhood is the great enlightener, educator and mystagogue. Man's cunning has removed him far from nature, but woman's artifice has led her farther still away. The very weapons which help her to success, beauty and skilful adaptiveness in the craft of sex, blunt primitive instincts. As much a product of social exigency as of nature, the modern woman gropes in fastidious half-lights, veiling facts behind euphemisms and half-innocent hypocrisies which deceive no one. The restricted curiosity of her sex rarely encourages her to range beneath the smooth surface of things. But whenever her mind is untainted and her understanding clear, she may become, on becoming a mother, something of a practical philosopher. The moral is as great as the physical change ; the self-decorative sense shrinks to reasonable proportions ; she feels that she is a part of the protective machinery which nature has designed to preserve man, and that her weapons are tenderness and

love, pity and forbearance. She no longer looks for reasons in the pert armoury of her wit, but finds them in the resistless logic of her heart ; and, whatever her creed, she discovers that religion undefined by doctrine which is shared by maternity deep down in the scale of ascending life.

The child that slept on Althea's breast was the great magician—the link binding her to eternity—coming she knew not whence, going she knew not where—a blossom plucked in the darkness by the hands of hope. Looking back, the mother found old jealousies vanishing; looking forward, she beheld new duties rising. Her son would be the next Prince of Monteverro. This thought thrilled her and swallowed up her personal ambition. There had been great Monteverros in the record of the family. Might not her son become something more than the last princeling in a dwindling family? When the English nurse carried the sleeping child into the morning sunshine, where the swallow-tailed butterflies were fluttering over the oleanders, the conscious mother glanced after the white-robed pair with a strange sense of altruistic pride.

But in human affairs there is nothing rarer than a perfect balance. Whilst all went well with the Princess and her son, the Prince's calm was disturbed



by an unnatural infusion of bitterness, the very existence of which he was ashamed to admit. The morbid taint of his race began to work. There are families in whom jealousy lurks as an active atavism which a whisper may convert into a vivid spark, and broodings fan into a flame. Of such unlucky houses the Monteverros were one. The Prince loved his wife with a passion curiously restrained, as though his mother's spirit controlled its Italian fire. But it was a passion which demands adoration in return to keep it sweet; instead of this Althea met it with constant amiability and tact. Where there is no hero there can be no heroics, was the interpretation of her wisely attitude.

Yet there were moments when she half seriously criticised him for want of a definite ambition in life, indirectly hinting at her respect for men of action. They rarely spoke of the graver matters of conduct without the Prince's nervous pride receiving an unintended slight. His English training, however, had taught him to conceal all morbid workings of the soul, and Althea did not perceive the danger of frank utterance with such a nature until it was too late.

Before her child was born, anticipating its sex, she had spoken to her husband of her wishes for the

boy's future, building the vaguely happy castles of hopeful motherhood.

"And what shall he be?" she asked. "Italy has a great army; let us find him a career in that. I could not bear a child of mine to have no higher ambition than a racing stable."

"Yet a racing stable's good enough for me," said the Prince, smiling gravely.

Althea laughed good-naturedly.

"You shall serve," she said, "as an example of what the next Prince of Monteverro must avoid."

"You think it's time, then, the race blossomed into a hero?" suggested the Prince ironically.

"Yes—if it can."

"Like—whom shall we say?—Colonel Sancroft."

"I should like my boy to have the glory without the risks," she replied.

"Like a stage hero," said the Prince, repressing a sneer. "But in Colonel Sancroft's case the risks are left to the imagination; the glory is all in the newspapers. The correspondents turn on the limelight, whilst you and I sit in the box and clap our hands."

Althea had stepped through the gates of a romantic passion into the ordered paths of a singularly reasonable marriage. The little crop of wild oats which her heart had sown bore no visible fruits, but what

poisonous ears there were the Prince had garnered. Before his marriage the general whisper had troubled him ; he had even questioned the Duchess of Southshire, and remembered her answer.

"Just before Colonel Sancroft was ordered out," said her Grace, "it is true that he did admire Miss Westbrooke a little indiscreetly perhaps. But it meant nothing. Miss Westbrooke may have been flattered for a passing moment, that is all."

This assurance he had accepted at the time, but gradually suspicion had grown in the suitable soil of his imagination. The Prince fed his disease on his wife's admiration for Sancroft's soldiership till he hated his name and fame. True, however, to his training, his jealousy was concealed under the easy indifference which almost hid the man from himself.

"I am a sportsman, a man of the world, and a Prince," his manner seemed to say. "I know what society is and do not expect too much."

And so he had taught himself never to make a fuss. He cultivated "good form" almost as a substitute for religion.

But it was not until a few weeks before the birth of his son that Sancroft's shadow began to dog the Prince to the point of obsession.

The affairs of his racing stable had called him to

England, and one day he chanced to overhear one of those careless conversations which convert smoking-rooms into the lethal-chambers of character.

He was lunching with a sporting Guardsman at a Service Club of which Sancroft was a member. His host had left him for a moment for another guest, and the Prince was lounging back in a deep arm-chair glancing at an illustrated paper. Seated with their backs towards him, and hidden in similar deep lounges, two men were chatting, when the name Sancroft suddenly riveted his attention.

"Sancroft's to have a brigade," said one. "It will be in the next *Gazette*."

"Then he'll be about the youngest man who ever commanded one," returned the other. "He's a deuced lucky fellow!"

"He deserves all he gets."

"Still he has had luck."

"He's a dashed fine soldier!"

"And an odd one, too. He was deperately in love with that Althea Westbrooke, the singer who married some foreign swell. In order to be stopped making a fool of himself he actually wrote to the Commander-in-Chief, whose especial pet he is, begging to be sent out of the way of mischief!"

"That's nonsense. Sancroft never cared a rap for

any woman yet, my dear chap! You've got hold of the wrong end of an ancient yarn. Althea Westbrook fell in love with Sancroft, and as everyone knows he is intended to marry the daughter of the fellow whose property is next his own. Sancroft withdrew from the running, and let in the foreign fellow, who exported the most charming woman the stage has seen in my day."

Had the Prince followed his instincts and possessed a dagger he would have stabbed the speakers where they sat; but he lay back in his chair, pale with repressed fury, and with beads of cold perspiration gathering on his forehead.

The conversation ceased and the two men left the room by the door opposite before he had thought of looking round. The spirit of mischief had sprung on him out of the darkness and set the whole battery of self-torment at work. The simplest remedy he rejected at once. He might have gone to his wife and said, "Is it true that once you were in love with Colonel Sancroft, or that he was once in love with you?" But such a step was opposed to the domestic policy now ruling their joint lives. The Prince's morbid pride rendered such a discussion between them impossible. What had happened in the life of either before marriage, in his theory of life as a man

of the world, did not concern their joint existence now. Moreover, Althea's dignity and nobility of manner deeply impressed the polished world into which she had moved.

She was beyond suspicion. Was he to attack her because a few phrases of vulgar gossip had been flung at him from behind a corner? Althea did not deny that she was a friend of Sancroft, nor conceal her admiration for his character. There were a hundred excellent reasons for strangling his jealousy that his Anglo-American training perceived, but which his Italian temperament rejected. He was wandering in one of those mazes of tainted emotions to which there is no clue. Common-sense sat outside the labyrinth, and watched the curling vapours within, vainly preaching comfort, patience, and trust. "You are jealous of a past in which you have no concern," it said, "and which the very fact of your marriage accepted and condoned."

But such feeble efforts were as a penny fan to blow out a coal-fire. The devil of Mistrust had sown the tares in the poisoned, sickly soil.

Nursing his brood of ill-omened fancies the Prince returned to Monteverro two days before his son was born.

## CHAPTER XXXI

BUT the birth of his son and the new interests evoked acted on the Prince's jealousies as an anodyne, and in due time a sentiment of which he was ashamed might have died of atrophy. For the campaign in India was over; and Sancroft, now occupied with the general scheme of tribal pacification, no longer loomed so large before the public imagination. But the winds of mischance blow into the windows of disaster; the morbid growths whether of the mind or the body, which have taken root, readily find nourishment in their environment.

At the beginning of May, when his son was about six weeks old, the Prince left Monteverro for Florence. There was to be a review of troops in the Cascine; one of the Prince's numerous cousins had been promoted to the command of a company of Bersaglieri, and there was a race-meeting of which he was one of the promoters.

The morning was hot and sunny, but the cool wind from the mountain stirred over the terraced walks of the stately gardens. The heavy barouche drawn by two powerful horses was waiting beneath the white marble porch of the villa. Over the peaks, still patched with snow, a few white clouds were floating, but all else was blue, and beneath, the world was full of life; it stirred in the dust of the river-way, droned and chirruped in the dry grasses, and fluttered across the flower-beds. The green lizards darted furtively through the climbing roses which grew round the pillars of the long terrace, or sat basking on the hot stones, a vivid eye fixed on the tiny flies. It was a rich, opulent morning of a Tuscan spring, which plumps the grape, fattens the fig, and ripens the maize. Althea in white, but bare-headed, was standing on the terrace between two pyramidal cypresses, talking to her husband.

"I wish you were coming," said the Prince, glancing at her under her tilted sunshade. "The Prince of Naples will be there and a whole bevy of military swells. Besides, our cousin Onofrio will be disappointed if you're not there to see him at the head of his company."

"I should like to see the review," said Althea, "but I can't leave baby."



"Devoted mother!" said the Prince, smiling towards the shady end of the terrace where, in a wonderful cradle under a cataract of lace and the nurse's eye, his son was sleeping.

"Let's look at him," he added.

They approached the softly breathing child.

"He looks fit, nurse," said the Prince.

"Quite a robust child," said the nurse, slightly raising the lace from the little pink face.

Under the swansdown the small curled legs were stretching.

"Dreaming?" asked the Prince, watching him curiously.

"No, waking," said Althea. "Don't you think he is rather like Prince Felice?"

"He might be if he had a nose. My good father had one. He's an odd little fellow, and not bad looking for a baby. If mixed races help a fellow this Anglo-American-Italian should have a good chance."

The Prince laughed. For the moment his mind was as clear as the sky.

"Don't forget the Keltic element," said Althea, smiling down on her son. "I'm half a Welshwoman. He is an English-Welsh-American-Italian!"

"Let us pray he won't lose his identity in the confusion," said the Prince, stooping to kiss the child.

*"Addio, figlio mio! I must be off where duty calls."*

They turned from the cradle towards the flight of marble steps descending to the carriage drive, where the horses were champing their bright bits and grinding the grey gravel under their strong hoofs in the petulance of harnessed delay.

The Prince watched them for a moment with that comforting sense of ownership which the possession of a fine pair provokes even in a misanthropist.

"You rarely see such a strong pair in England," said the Prince.

"We don't live half-way up mountains and ten miles from railway stations," replied Althea patriotically.

He looked beneath the white sunshade at her calm face with an air of amiable mockery.

"Spoken like a true daughter of John Bull," said he. "What John Bull doesn't own, John Bull wisely rejects with scorn. He wouldn't take the climate of Monteverro at a gift, or exchange Surrey hills for Apennines."

"You are much 'John Bullier' than I am," replied Althea. "You even talk French with an English accent."

"That's almost true," said the Prince, putting on

his left-hand glove. "I'm smeared so thick with British prejudice that I've lost my way in the mixture. My mother thought the English stupid but honest, and distrusted the Italians as the children of Machiavelli. Behold in me the result of English dullness and Italian dexterity! But, good-bye; I shall end in missing my train."

He kissed her cheek, pressed her fingers, and walked down the gleaming white steps, to which his sporting tweed clothes and English straw hat presented an incongruous contrast.

The footman closed the door, mounted quickly beside the coachman, and the great horses started with a rush.

Glancing back, the Prince beheld his son in the nurse's arms, his beautiful wife smiling after him with peaceful eyes, and heard her clear *à rivederci* through the grinding of the wheels. The picture, set in light and colour, in green, and gold, and blossom, sank pleasantly into his mind, soothing his suspicions, and calming momentarily the restless uneasiness of his temperament.

The carriage swung round the steep white road in the mountain side, by vines and olives and small Tuscan homesteads, where the brown, bare-legged children sprang out of the dust to salute the Prince, past

lonely flower-bestrewn shrines, and on through the squalid street of an interminable village to the station, where the uniformed authority, bowing low, regretted that the train from Rome would be thirty minutes late.

"We are always late in Tuscany," said the Prince resignedly.

"Alas! your Excellency," said the man, "it is true; but although we have no initiative, yet we are not destitute of other virtues."

The Prince smiled, and the stationmaster smiled, for the meaning was clear to both.

## CHAPTER XXXII

IT was on the third morning after his arrival in Florence that the storm burst on the unhappy Prince. He had just finished his morning coffee, and lighted his first cigarette, when his cousin, Captain Onofrio Sanchiarri, came to see him. The old Palazzo, near the Pitti Palace, had long ago been converted into public offices, and the Prince now owned one of the imposing new houses which sprung up at that ambitious period when Florence dreamt she was to be Queen of Italy.

The Prince's window on the second floor looked over the tops of the garden palms on the swift green Arno sliding between its embankments and swirling over shoals of grey gravel. The smell of the flowers and sounds of Florence reached him pleasantly through the open windows. The far-off rumbling of a heavy cart on the Lung'arno, the faint swirl of the river, the rustling of the palm-fronds, the trumpets of

a regiment marching back to barracks over the Ponte alla Carraja, with other undefined murmurings, drifted pleasantly into the quiet room on the resonant Florentine air.

The musings which his cousin's arrival interrupted were not disagreeable. For the moment the practical side of the man was entirely ascendant. He had been accepting facts at their real value. How ridiculous to fret about a vague incident in his wife's past unmarried life, which her affection for her child, and her interest in new duties, had evidently effaced from her mind! What reasonable man, moreover, ever listened to the gossip of a club? The whole thing must be forgotten!

It was at this point in his reflections that his cousin arrived in his smart Bersaglieri uniform, and stood in some embarrassment opposite the Prince.

"It is not generally my privilege to see you so early, Onofrio *mio*," said the Prince.

But instead of replying, Captain Sanchiarri, a dark young soldier, with aquiline features and deep brown eyes, looked at his cousin seeking an easy opening for a difficult subject.

"I see," resumed the Prince, "that your business isn't pleasant. What is it? Did you lose your money

yesterday on Zouave, or is it the cards, or perchance the pigeons?"

"Except so far as my honour is concerned in yours," replied Sanchiarri, "the trouble touches me not."

And then all the slumbering suspicions of the Prince woke with a painful thrill, and shook him with apprehension.

"Whose honour?" he asked.

"Yours and the Princess's. Listen to me, Fernando, and you shall judge. Last night there was a large gathering at the Club in the Tornabuoni, and several strangers were present, among them a Frenchman named Délamar de Bouteville, who, it seems, is malevolently interested in the affairs of the Principessa."

"I never heard of him," said the Prince.

"He spoke most basely of you."

"Can you remember what he said—his very words?" asked the Prince calmly, but with a wicked glitter in his eyes.

"Yes," said Sanchiarri, speaking French. "'That is the little princeling who married the actress who adored the Indian officer who jilted her. *Quelle histoire! Ecco!*' Fernando, those are his words. Sesto of my company heard them and reported them to me."

"And what next, Onofrio *mio*?"

"It chanced that I was playing dominoes in the adjoining room, and I sought out this pestilent Parisian, who, it seems, is a scribbling poet and journalist, and called upon him to declare what he said was a lie, otherwise I, or some other member of my family, would require the most complete satisfaction. If, therefore, Fernando, you care to leave this affair in my hands, you may trust me to see that the insult is not unpunished."

"And what did de Bouteville say?" asked the Prince.

"Refused to withdraw on the grounds that what he had said was confidential, and ought not to have been repeated."

"And is that all?"

"That is all, except that we exchanged cards."

Whilst listening to his cousin, the Prince's peace of mind seemed to split itself up into whirling fragments of rage and hate. He felt the blood singing in his ears, and a hot taste rising at the back of his throat. But although unable to guide his reason or control his instincts, his English training preserved his outward calm.

"The quarrel, which is an annoying one," he replied quietly, "is of course mine, and I thank you,



Onofrio, for the spirit with which you have so far conducted it for me. I will now place myself entirely in your hands. This de Bouteville has dared to fling about the name of the Princess in public. He must now take the consequences. I need not tell you what these are."

"An abject apology in writing for mentioning the name of a certain lady disparagingly in public, or else—fight."

"You grasp the situation admirably, Onofrio," said the Prince.

"The fellow isn't a coward," said Sanchiarri, marvelling at his cousin's calm; "and when he has to decide between being morally kicked through the mud and fighting, I have small doubt which he will choose."

"In that case," said the Prince, "I shall hope to kill him. Now, if you please, I should like this matter settled as soon as possible. I am in your hands."

The Bersagliere took his plumed hat from the chair on which he had placed it, rebuckled his sword, and set out with his comrade, Lieutenant Sesto, to the hotel on the Lung'arno Acciajoli, where de Bouteville was awaiting to be called upon. He did not intend to miss such an opportunity of advertising

himself as a duel with a distinguished Italian prince afforded. Already in anticipation he saw his name in the *Figaro*, and the *procès-verbal* which he well knew his *témoins*, the two French journalists who accompanied him, would draw up for that famous journal. Undoubtedly the duel would be *très smart*; it might even sell out the edition of erotic poems at that moment vainly cumbering the publisher's shelves.

When his cousin closed the door, the Prince walked to the window, his mind on the rack. Suppose that what this insolent Frenchman had said were true. But was it not more probable that this scribbling *boulevardier*—the Prince knew the type—was merely repeating the gossip of the side-scenes or kitchen. Such men deserve to be knocked on the head like rats and flung into the Arno!

A mental shock sets unsuspected chords vibrating. His feeling for his wife had suddenly changed. The insult had degraded her; her dignity was gone, her pride lowered. It seemed, too, that from the day of his marriage to the present he had been steadily moving to the crucifixion of his heart, which seemed twisting in helpless misery, impaled on a dreadful thought, just as an insect struggles on a pin.

Outside the morning sun was shining on the green Arno, the bridges and the quays; on the groups of

tourists hurrying to the Uffizzi, the Pitti Palace, or the Bobboli Gardens, with that fatuous air of artistic seriousness that had often made him smile. Outside nothing was changed, within nothing remained the same. His nature was incapable of feeling love without suffering jealousy, the one sprang up under the shade of the other like a poisonous fungoid growth under the boughs of a noble tree.

And thus an hour passed like twenty, and at the end of it his cousin, accompanied by Lieutenant Sesto, returned with all the pomp of their new position shining on both.

Sanchiarri explained with dignity. De Bouteville was willing to express regret for having mentioned a lady's name in public place; but beyond that his *témoins* said it was impossible for their client as a Frenchman and a man of honour to go.

"The result is, Fernando," said his cousin, "that you meet in the Cascine to-morrow at half-past five."

"With pistols?" said the Prince.

"No, swords."

The Prince felt a cold shiver at the apex of his heart.

"If it had been pistols," said he, "he would have been as good as dead. With swords one never knows; I haven't touched a foil for months."

The three young men lunched together, carefully refraining from hinting at the coming duel in the presence of the servants, who, notwithstanding, perceived that something unusual was stirring. After luncheon they went up to a large *atelier* at the top of the house for an hour's fencing.

Lieutenant Sesto, one of the crack exponents of the *arte della scherma* of his corps, demonstrated the superiority of the Italian school over the French, maintaining that when it was a question of serious fighting the lightness and elegance of the French *tireur* had small chance against the furious onrush and deadly lunge of the Italian *schermitore*. The discussion which arose on this subject between Sesto and his captain was less reassuring to the Prince, destined to test the virtues of the opposing schools at the sword's point, than to the amateurs who proved to their own satisfaction that the life of de Bouteville was practically at the mercy of their principal.

The Prince, although out of practice, was still a formidable antagonist, although his lunging lacked accuracy and his recovery speed.

"*Dritto! dritto! dritto!*" cried the active lieutenant, springing back from the Prince's thrusts or turning them aside with an almost imperceptible movement of the wrist.

But ere long some of his former skill returned, and once he got under Sesto's guard with a clean thrust that struck his leathern jacket dead in the centre.

"Ha! ha! 'dead for a ducat,'" said the Prince in English, encouraged by his success.

"*Bravissimo!*" cried his cousin. "Lunge like that and you will split this insolent Frenchman like a lark."

The fencing bouts steadied the Prince's nerves and relieved their tension. At three o'clock, accompanied by his cousin and at the latter's suggestion, they drove in the Cascine, exchanging grave bows with the Florentine society on its way to the Piazzale del Re, where the military band was playing. Just beyond that favourite focus of Tuscan leisure, a big fair young man on a bicycle whizzed past the carriage with a whirr of pneumatic tyres.

"That is de Bouteville," said Sanchiarri.

The Prince glanced after the enemy whom he had never seen.

"Holy Virgin forbid that he fence as fiercely as he scorches!" said the Prince.

"The scribbler fellows have feeble wrists," said his cousin. "You will stop his bicycling, Fernando mio, but the puncture will not be in his tyre."

Later they again saw de Bouteville at the far end

of the Cascine near the Rajah's monument. He had dismounted from his bicycle and was inspecting, with an air of interest, a smooth piece of turf in a meadow between two copses.

"He reminds me of one looking at his own grave," said the Captain.

"Or at mine!" said the Prince.

For the third time on the drive they saw the Frenchman, this time outside the restaurant in the Piazzale del Re, drinking *vermouth* and laughing with his friends.

"Curse him!" muttered the Prince. The reappearance of his wife's traducer in high spirits and vigorous health seemed ominous to the suspicious Italian. A chill crept over him, and he scarcely heard the chatter of his cousin. A dread of seeing his foe again, even against his will made the Prince shorten his drive.

"Home, John," said he to his English coachman.

Having set down Captain Sanchiarri in the Viale Principe Umberto, where his cousin took a cab to go to his quarters, promising to return for dinner, the Prince drove home to keep an appointment with his lawyer.

Among the letters waiting for him was one from Althea, the only one he read.

"Fernando *mio*," she wrote, "your son sends his love, I a commission. Will you get me the last number of *The Nineteenth Century* at Vieusseux's Library? There is an article on Colonel Sancroft's Column which I want to read. You will be sorry to hear that he has been ill from enteric fever.

"When you have exhausted the delights of Florence we shall expect to see you back at Monteverro. Do you think you might remember to bring back a bottle of Dulip's Rheumatic Embrocation from the English chemist in the Tornabuoni for nurse? Old Pietro has lumbago and she is dying to try her hand on him. 'These Italians,' she says, 'have no idea of taking care of themselves.' A pleasant modest people we English! 'Dulip's' she bids me say. Be put off with no other!

"The Cardinal drove over to dinner last night and brought a small retinue of church dignities with him. '*Ohimè!*' he cried when he heard of your business at Florence, 'that wicked horse-racing.' Still, I believe he prefers your scepticism to my heresy. 'We must preserve the little one for Mother Church,' said he when he saw his grand-nephew. I dropped my eyes meekly and said—nothing. The Principessa is wise! After dinner I sang the air from '*Philomela*'—the one you like—and '*perdition catch my soul*' but I longed

to dance too, yet dared not. The Cardinal said it was 'divine' and I believe he meant it.

"My greeting to cousin Onofrio. Tell him I am consumed to see him at the head of his Bersaglieri, who have the honour—have they not?—of being the fastest marchers in Europe—after, of course, the British Grenadiers! But *addio*, Fernando *mio*, for I grow prolix. Your son joins your affectionate wife in love.

"ALTHEA OF MONTEVERRO."

The letter, in spite of the reference to Colonel Sancroft, came refreshingly, as balmy airs in dry plains. "I am," thought the Prince, "like Othello in a tragedy where there is no Iago."

He rang for a servant and sent him on his wife's commissions.

"If you catch the six-thirty train you will reach Monteverro before midnight," he said.

"Althea shall have her magazine and nurse her embrocation to-morrow morning," he thought. "If anything happens she will understand."

Then he put her letter carefully away in his cabinet, writing on the margin in English: *From Althea perhaps the last.*

As he locked the drawer a servant announced his *arruocatto*. Then the Prince arranged his affairs in



such a manner that Althea might benefit as a widow to the greatest extent compatible with the Italian law. The old servant who witnessed the deed felt the mystery thickening around him.

"There is mischief abroad," thought he, "but may the evil eye be afar!"

Captain Sanchiarri came to dinner in civilian dress.

"Thy affairs are settled, cousin," said he. "And perchance thy poor cousin is not forgotten."

"He is remembered," said the Prince. But they found a jocular tone not easy. A weight was in the atmosphere.

After dinner they played two games of billiards and went to bed.

"God of war! What a charming domestic evening for a captain of Bersaglieri," said the Prince. "We only want nurse and the baby to make it complete."

"Sleep is the best for the tired nerves, Fernando *mio*," said Sanchiarro quietly.

That night the soldier slept ill, and was awake at dawn. But fatigue brought the Prince a deep slumber, from which his cousin awoke him as the first low beams were reddening the closed shutters.

"Ah!" said the Prince in English, awaking. "All right! I remember."

Then he rose and dressed, choosing, instead of a linen shirt with a stiff front, one of light silk, and a dark suit.

He was silent but calm.

"You are well, Fernando?" asked his cousin.

"Well enough, Onofrio, but so early one has little to say. One leaves that to the birds."

In the boughs of a cedar in the garden a nightingale was singing jubilantly.

"'Tis the first time I have been out, Onofrio," added the Prince, tying with care a sailor's knot of dark blue silk, "but I think this tie may suit so solemn an occasion."

Then in silence they quietly descended the stairs. Nothing stirred, the peace of the morning floated over the household.

Then they crossed the garden, drenched with dew. The bird ceased singing at their approach; the only sound was the swish of the Arno over its shingly bed.

At the gate was the carriage, with the English coachman on the box—a taciturn Yorkshireman, who alone of the Prince's household was in the secret of his early summons.

The Prince entered the barouche, Sanchiarro having placed the long sword-case on the seat

opposite, followed him. They drove off to the Cascine.

It was a perfect morning of a Tuscan May. The summit of Monte Morello was capped with fleecy clouds, which unfurled themselves and floated across the valley like ghostly swans.

Before the gates of the Cascine a brougham was waiting. Within it was the doctor. Lieutenant Sesto, in civilian dress, stood by the door awaiting their arrival.

The gates had been just opened; the guardian, half-asleep, glanced at them suspiciously.

After a few words the carriages started again, the Prince leading, down the long narrow avenues of the Park to the meadow where the Prince had seen de Bouteville surveying the ground.

"We meet here," said Sanchiarri. "We are the first."

Then he instructed the coachman to wait near the monument of the Rajah of Kohlapore—two hundred yards away, and behind a thick screen of young trees.

Far off, beyond the sluggish stream, whose turbid waters stain the Arno at the apex of the Park, a few peasants were labouring among the vines, but the glades and paths at that early hour were deserted.

The beauty of the morning increased. The mountains to the north were shedding their cloud-caps as the sun dried the tepid atmosphere; the slanting beams fell on a thousand flowers, rioting in mazes of colour; flutterings of blue and purple, and the blood-red of the anemones danced round the boles of the trees, and across the waving meadows. The air was heavy with the scent of the acacia, and the last milky blossoms of the chestnut still marked the soft green of the trees.

A sense of the perpetual youth of spring stirred over the land. The Prince felt it as he leaned against the gate and waited, calm and almost impassive outwardly, but inwardly full of painful thoughts. The others, grouped together a few yards, off were speaking in low tones. The Anglo-American side of his character was at that moment in the ascendant, and a certain instinct of Yankee shrewdness made pertinent reflections which his Italian pride sullenly rejected.

"Wasn't it ridiculous for a man in his position to get up at five o'clock in the morning to fight a duel with a loose-tongued French scribbler whom he had never seen? Men of his rank were the constant victims of slander. What a fool Althea will think me," he thought, "and what a fool I am!"

Then in the distance he heard the rolling of wheels and knew that the others were coming. As the sound approached, his dull rage, reasserting itself, swallowed up the dread of death which had crept on him from the unfolded bosom of the morning.

A victoria, too small for its freight, appeared round the curve in the road, and the three Frenchmen descended. The Prince noticed that one was thick-set, with a black, pointed beard, the other clean shaven, with long hair. The big de Bouteville overtopped his *témoins* by a head. He wore a high hat with the straight brim, and a loose blue and white handkerchief fluttered over his closely-buttoned frock-coat. His dress suggested the literary swash-buckler, and at the sight of the man who had set all the evil machinery of his complex nature in motion, the vengeful anger of his race conquered the irony of the Prince's philosophy till he was conscious only of hate.

But M. de Bouteville was rather in search of a picturesque advertisement than a bloody quarrel. In secret he admired the Prince as a *grand seigneur* and dashing sportsman. He had come out of several affairs of honour without harm, and anticipated nothing more serious than a scratch, given or taken, from the approaching encounter. A skilful fencer,

he believed only the *maladroits* "got themselves hurt."

The seconds met and bowed with ceremony ; the combatants saluted ; the doctor drew a small case from his pocket and placed it carefully on the step of the stile.

After a whispered conversation Sanchiarro approached his cousin.

"We have the choice of ground ; take the higher, keep cool, and don't waste your strength," said he.

The swords were produced—perfectly-balanced twin blades of blue steel—and handed in turn to the combatants, who, meanwhile, had removed their coats and waistcoats, and faced each other in light silk shirts; of which the folds stirred in the faint morning breeze.

"Are you ready, messieurs?" cried the Frenchman with the black beard.

The antagonists advanced a step nearer, but with lowered points.

"*Tires.*"

The steel clashed with a musical ring. Click, click, rang the blades as each felt the strength of the other's wrist.

Suddenly the Prince made a fierce lunge which de Bouteville parried. Then thrust and *riposte* followed

quickly, the Frenchman acting on the defensive, the Prince fiercely attacking.

"He will tire our man down," muttered Sesto to his comrade.

But before he had uttered the words a thrust from the Prince entered the folds of de Bouteville's shirt who, springing back to avoid the point, slipped on one knee.

The seconds intervened. The assault had lasted two minutes. Both men were breathing heavily; the Prince's face was white, his mouth set, his eyes dilated; de Bouteville had felt the blade of the sword pass along his body like a cold, thin, murderous snake. He felt the duel was a very different affair from the little friendly meetings with adversaries equally anxious not to be hurt. His anxious seconds, eager for any excuse to close the encounter, examined the chest of their principal, but the Prince's sword had not drawn blood, although a thin streak became visible on the Prince's left hand.

"Your principal is hurt, monsieur," said the second to Sanchiarro, "and I am of opinion that, honour now being satisfied, the encounter should cease."

Sanchiarro glanced at the Prince's hand.

"It is a scratch," said the Prince in French to his cousin, "and I must beg you to make these

gentlemen understand that this is not a meeting *à la mode de Paris.*"

The Frenchmen heard and understood. There was a slight pause, during which the *cicadas* in the grass could be heard chirruping, and then the same voice, this time with a nervous vibration, cried :

"Are you ready, gentlemen—*tirez.*"

Again the combatants sprung to the attack, and this time de Bouteville knew that he was fighting for his life. There was no mistaking the devil that sat in his opponent's eye.

The blades followed each other in narrowest circles of danger ; this time the Frenchman attacked with all his craft, skill, and strength. But the Prince met him with reckless fury, and, refusing to recede, the two men came too near for thrust in tierce or carte, and just as the seconds were hurrying to separate them de Bouteville's point struck the Prince full in the chest, whilst almost simultaneously he received a savage counter-thrust in the abdomen.

The Prince staggered back into his cousin's arms with a gasp, whilst de Bouteville, dazed with the shock of his own wound, yet scarcely conscious he was hurt, remained standing, a red stain on his thin blade.

In a moment the doctor was on the spot. They



placed the Prince on the turf on a coat. From a deep puncture in his chest bright drops of blood were oozing, and the froth on his lips was tinged with blood. The Prince opened his eyes, looked up at the doctor, and said :

“ I can’t breathe.”

The doctor made no reply.

The Prince glanced across the trampled turf at his opponent, now faint and sick, sitting on the grass between his friends, one of whom fanned him with a hat.

But the coachman, who had watched the duel from behind the trees, now drove up, and the Prince, breathing heavily, was supported to his carriage.

“ Eight inches of steel through his lungs is enough for any man, doctor,” said he, as they placed him among the cushions.

Then he closed his eyes to shut out the splendour of the morning. The weight gathering upon his chest filled him with icy dismay—what did it mean ?

“ You’ll be all right again in a week or two,” said his cousin.

“ I was a damned fool to go out with that Frenchman,” said the Prince in English. His rage exhausted, habit was reasserting itself.

They took him home and placed him on his bed, where he lay pale and quiet till the doctor came with

two colleagues. He asked news of his enemy now lying with a rising temperature at his hotel, severely wounded three inches above the groin, and in danger of peritonitis.

"He must feel almost as big a fool as I do," murmured the Prince in English.

The doctors looked grave. The risks of collapse from internal hæmorrhage were great. When Sanchiarro heard this verdict, he sent the Prince's English valet to Monteverro.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THE contrast between the confusion that had fallen on the Prince's house in Florence and the cheerfulness that with the lovely May morning descended on his villa at Monteverro, is one which suggests, when multiplied a hundredfold, the arguments persuading pessimists that destiny and Providence are only more pompous names for chance.

In the darkened room where the Prince lay breathing painfully, with a perforated lung and a taste of blood in his mouth, a wavering, regretful soul was flitting toward the dark; in the great nursery at Monteverro, with the tall windows opening on the gardens, and flooded with the scent of flowers and the happy murmurings of spring, a glimmering consciousness was steering itself toward the light.

Althea had risen earlier than usual, and, with a sense of peace in her heart, went to see her son. He was pink and rosy, and smiled upon her with the first rational smile of expanding babyhood. She sang him a verse of a quaint Italian nursing song, leaning

over his cradle the while with affection in her eyes. The lullaby filled the lofty room with low, clear music; the tall English nurse stood by smiling with pleasure. The pretty swinging lilt of the refrain caught the child's attention, and he held one of his mother's fingers in his own crumpled hand to detain her.

"What a darling!" exclaimed Althea, with a little burst of maternal enthusiasm. "What a darling!"

Then she went down to her boudoir with a glow in her heart. Death and disaster were remote shadows; their very existence forgotten in the radiance and joy of the morning. The baby's smile, with the mystery behind it, called forth a train of thought which drove her to read Wordsworth's "Ode on Immortality." The spirit underlying the poem penetrated the blue of the Tuscan morning.

The book was a relic of early days, read as a child at her father's parsonage. Only the binding was changed. A Florentine artist had encased the volume exquisitely in white and gold. The message of the poem now reached her imagination with the light of its inspiration, and a host of memories came trooping back on the stream of her fancy as she replaced the book.

Even the minor material pleasures seemed acuter

on that magic morning. Never was tea more fragrant than that sipped by the open window of her room overlooking the wide Tuscan plain a thousand feet below.

At nine the post arrived, bringing no news from Florence, but letters from Mrs. Dormer, the Duchess of Southshire, and a London house agent.

She read Mrs. Dormer's letter first. It left on her mind an impression that her old friend had had nearly enough housekeeping at Bath. Mrs. Dormer had desired "to organise cooking classes for the elder girls," but her sister pooh-poohed the idea on the grounds that "they wouldn't stand it in the kitchen." The length at which this grievance was discussed left no space for other matter, and the letter terminated abruptly with "love to baby."

The Duchess, who expended more care on her letters than most journalists devote to their articles, had elected to be one of Althea's regular correspondents. Her Grace, who occasionally wandered into such controversial subjects as "the crisis in the Church," or "the future of democracy," this time confined herself to relating the latest news of their common friends.

She was delighted to say that Colonel Sancroft was making a rapid recovery from an attack of

enteric fever which had caused the Duke, herself, and the country generally some moments of acute uneasiness. He was expected home at the beginning of June.

Sancroft's name scarcely troubled Althea. The coming of her son had banished foolish thoughts and vain regrets to the remoter circles of her mind among memories to be treasured but never to be renewed. She had followed with anxiety in the newspapers the bulletins of the health of the only hero she had ever known, but now she looked forward to the chances of meeting him again in London with hardly a tremor of unwholesome excitement. How different might it have been if—but she repressed the thought and resumed the Duchess's letter.

Sir Rupert had been much shaken by the news of his son's illness, and especially by a reckless rumour, published in an evening paper, stating that the doctors had abandoned all hope of saving him. His wonderful health had of late been failing, and he was now suffering from a weak heart. But *tout lasse, tout passe*, observed her Grace, and at the age of seventy-six something must give way. However, Miss Sancroft was a devoted nurse, and the Duchess trusted that a merciful Providence might yet spare them Sir Rupert for several years to come as a high-

mindful gentleman of a type steadily becoming rarer.

There was another piece of news of which Althea appreciated the significance. Thanks to the financial counsels of his neighbour, Sir Francis Dodd, Sir Rupert had placed Falconoke in the hands of that rising young architect, Mr. Filimer, A.R.A. Under his unerring eye the exterior of Falconoke had been thoroughly overhauled and repaired, and the aspect of neglect which blighted the prosperous effect of the imposing old Tudor Hall had now entirely disappeared.

Here Althea saw the hand of Sybil Dodd, whose name, in the next paragraph, caught her eye.

"Our friends the Dodds," continued the Duchess, "are at the present moment travelling in Italy, exploring some of the old hill cities of the Apennines. Their wanderings are likely to bring them in the neighbourhood of Monteverro. But possibly they have called on you ere this. Sir Francis, who expects a subordinate place in the next ministry, finds it convenient to be away from his party for the moment."

Althea saw the Duchess's scheme of uniting Nutfield to Falconoke peeping slyly out of the letter as a warning to herself not to vainly thwart an arrangement predestined by her Grace. What had been

lately a prospect dumbly resented, had dwindled to an aversion which must be conquered. Sancroft, after a moment's hesitation, had brushed her out of his path as an obstacle to his ambition, but although the crown at which she had clutched was not the one which she had reached, yet, by a strange readjustment of feeling, the Princess of Monteverro was able to pardon a slight which Althea Westbrooke had been unable to overlook.

To dismiss the obsession of this idea, Althea visited the model dairy, since the birth of her son one of the centres of her minor interests. The fragrant materialism of the dainty place soothed her again. The slender-legged, silky-skinned, mild-eyed Alderneys nozzled her hand with that air of patronage which animals of gentle breed reserve for those who appreciate their beauty.

From the tiled and tessellated home of musing kine, she descended to the terrace where the peacocks in the fulness of their plumage were displaying their iridescence in the sunshine, much as a year ago she had caught the changing limelight on the waft of her flying draperies. Should she, she wondered, ever dance on a stage again. Between that near past and the present there was a gulf wide as that separating her stage experiences from those of her girlhood.



Returning through the humming garden she remembered her year of exile was nearly completed. Next month she was to begin her second conquest of London. Her conquest of the stage must be followed by a social victory of equal magnitude. The peacocks, flaunting before her a moment before, had unconsciously suggested the triumph of her return. Ambition, like baser vices, swells with what it pastures on.

In the galleries and state rooms, where the austere pomp of the Italian renaissance held sway, dwelt a refreshing coolness; the echo raised by her small-heeled shoes rang limpidly in the fresh silence. A few steps brought her from the Medicis to the luxury of to-day. Her own boudoir, a charming apartment decorated by the Prince's mother with delicate hangings of Japanese silk and priceless *Kakimonos*, suggested Parisian luxury seen through the eyes of a comfort-loving Mikado. Adjoining was a smaller room, fitted up by Althea as a library. Here were her books, there her Louis-Quatorze furniture and the homely souvenirs from the parsonage. On the quiet walls hung two admirable Corots purchased at a famous sale by the late Princess. In this room, flooded by the soft light filtering through the shutters, Althea wrote to her husband, at that moment sucking

lumps of ice and listening to the lurking steps of anxious relations on the stairs.

There was a house to let in Park Lane which would suit them capitally, and she proposed to open negotiations with the London house agent at once. What did the Prince think? Italy would be too hot for baby after May. This letter, full of the poignant irony of life, she herself was destined to open.

When her letter was finished and addressed, the sound of wheels on the gravel broke the stillness of the garden, and, glancing out between the shutters, Althea saw Sir Francis and Sybil Dodd alight from their carriage. In his tweed suit and travelling cap of the same texture Sir Francis was the typical *milor* of continental imagination. Sybil, in a fawn-coloured travelling dress and fragile straw-hat, atoned, so far as it was possible, for that peculiar air of insular pomp which clings to the prosperous English on Italian driving tours as the dust clings to their wheels.

Althea heard the bell peal through the quiet palace, and knew that the moment for testing her repentance and her magnanimity had come.

A few minutes later she was welcoming her visitors in one of the smaller reception-rooms, whilst Sir Francis, with rounded periods, apologised for a visit dust-stained and devoid of ceremony on the grounds

that they had understood that the Princess was with the Prince in Florence. "*Baedeker*," said he, tapping the volume which he carried, "who informs the world that the villa is shown to visitors in the absence of the family, is responsible. Hence, we have fallen on you, as it were, from the sky rather as accidental tourists than friends."

"You have fallen, then, from a most propitious sky," said the Princess, "and now you must stay."

During the prolonged oration of Sir Francis, Althea had furtively observed Sybil. The change was visible. When she had visited Nutfield Miss Dodd was merely a pretty and amiable girl. She had now become a charming, self-reliant, self-controlled young woman of the world.

Sir Francis, more curious to study the habits of this newly-made Princess than the pictures, statues, and gems of the collection, accepted Althea's invitation to stay at least to lunch with apologetic cordiality.

As a safe subject, he spoke enthusiastically of his tour, of ancient Poppi, unchanged from the Middle Ages, sleeping on its hill under the shadow of its Pretorio; of the long drive up to lovely Camaldoli, to breezy Saint 'Eremo, then back to leafy Vallambrosa. Talk of travel helped Sir Francis to steer so

neatly round the sharp corners that he almost forgot that prior social existence when the Princess had made a fool of his son and diverted the attention of his daughter's admirer.

Descending from Apennine peaks, they talked of common acquaintances, of the Duchess of Southshire and the Duke's gout, touching by the way on English politics, and finally sliding off at a tangent to "Italian Art," a subject to which Sir Francis believed that he "had devoted considerable attention in his youth."

For the first time since her marriage Althea did the honours of the magnificent place to English guests, showing them in turn the solemn and quaint Botticelli, the doubtful Andrea del Sarto, the pictures, the portraits, the statues, the busts of Monteverro princes and princesses, aching in frozen silence on their pedestals.

Few men and no women can avoid feeling thrills of secret pleasure whenever they impress their acquaintances by the dignity and beauty of surroundings, and Althea spent a pleasant half-hour displaying the splendours of Monteverro, even as her peacocks unfurled their feathers. Sir Francis, who measured human values by such tests, for once sat in a box, while the young woman whom he had formerly patronised drove by him in a triumphal car

But when the art treasures had been exhausted and exclaimed over, and they were returning from the severity of the Italian renaissance to the western wing of the villa, where the Anglo-Parisian luxury established in the life of the last princess reigned, Althea beheld the snares which golden circumstance prepares for all on whom it descends.

"I must," she thought reproachfully—"I must remember that I'm not a real exotic, but a weed from a Welsh garden grown under glass."

"There is one confession which, for the sake of my soul, I must make, Sir Francis," she said. "All this magnificence is terribly demoralising for a woman of my temperament."

"My dear Princess, what an idea!" he protested. "It lies as gracefully on you as"—he paused for a second, chasing the simile—"as its plumage does on a bird."

"Yes, like peacock's feathers. I'm a peacock peacocking. But please forgive the exhibition, and remember me!"

"When?" asked Sir Francis, slow but sure.

"In the liturgy, in your orisons. 'In all time of our wealth,' you know."

Sybil smiled; she felt herself forgiving a rival now

preparing bow and spear for the conquest of interests that no longer touched her own.

"Your name," she said, laughing, "shall be inserted in my Church Service on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you show us baby."

"Oh, do, Princess!" said Sir Francis, who had forgotten its very existence. "Show us Monteverro's greatest treasure."

Althea felt Sybil thawing, and was pleased.

"Wasn't I tiresome enough over the Prince's ancestors that you must tempt me with baby? I admit he's a darling, but babies are an acquired taste. Still, since amiable people suffer doting mothers gladly, I'll risk it."

And she led the way up the wide staircase to the nursery.

The cynical scoff at baby-worship, although there are not a few less rational cults puffed with constant praise. Sybil Dodd was frankly interested in little Felice (to be Felix in England) trying to suck his thumb under the lace curtains of his cradle.

"What a duck!" she exclaimed.

"Isn't he?" echoed his mother. "A perfect duck!"

"A most promising little fellow," said the bland

Sir Francis, wisely wagging his head. "And I'm so delighted that he is to have an English education, even if it must be Stonyhurst instead of Oxford."

All this time the terrible news was hurrying to Monteverro with Burkett, the Prince's man. It came like a fierce blast from a mountain gorge on a sleeping lake.

Luncheon was over. Althea and her guests were sitting on the shady terrace on cushions spread on a sculptured stone seat. Before them lay the quiet valley basking in the hot afternoon sunshine. The sky above was a dome of unbroken blue; all was still save the tinkle of the stream over the boulders, and the twittering of the birds in the shrubberies, until the sound of galloping hoofs broke the hush with the discord of human haste. Soon a horseman was seen spurring up the steep white road in a cloud of dust.

"It is Burkett, the Prince's man," said Althea. "What can he want?"

When the rider reached the terrace below, he dismounted, flung the reins to a gardener's boy and hurried up the steep path to the dark cypress where they sat.

"What is it, Burkett?" said the Princess, disturbed at the man's visible agitation.

Without speaking the breathless servant gave her

the note he carried, which she tore open. The Dodds saw her grow pale as she read.

"No bad news, I trust," said Sir Francis.

"The Prince fought a duel this morning," said Althea, "and has been dangerously wounded. I must go to him at once."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the baronet. "A duel!"

A short silence followed whilst the dread was coiling round Althea's hopes, until Sir Francis, who had no experience to meet a disaster so novel, began murmuring vague reassurances.

"With whom did the Prince fight?" asked Althea at last, gathering up the disastrous threads.

"A French gentleman," replied Burkett. "A Mr. de Bouteville—Délamar de Bouteville."

The name sent her mind rushing back with a painful shock.

"Monsieur de Bouteville was your son's friend, Sir Francis."

"Good heavens!" cried the baronet for the second time, thoroughly perturbed. "Monsieur de Bouteville? To be sure. A clever but most eccentric young man. How terrible! how terrible!"

"Mr. de Bouteville's badly hurt too, sir," said Burkett to Sir Francis. "They say there has not been so fierce a duel for years."



"How shocking!" exclaimed the baronet.

But Sybil whispered to her father and they withdrew to the end of the terrace leaving the Princess with her husband's valet.

The man, however, added little to what she had learnt from Captain Sanchiarro's letter. The Prince was wounded in the lung and must be kept very quiet. He had said, "This is a bad business, Burkett, luck's against me for once." As for the cause of the quarrel *they* knew of none. Even John, the Prince's coachman who had driven the Prince to the Cascine, knew nothing of that.

The man looked at her oddly, and Althea, with the sense of horror thickening around her, dimly divined the cause of the quarrel, as through a stained glass window of some sombre room one half sees the shadow of a white bird in the twilight of an ominous day.

"Suppose," she thought, "the Prince die."

The Monteverros were an ill-fated race.

Meanwhile the Dodds' carriage had driven up to take them back to the little hotel, where they were staying, high up in the mountains. Sybil for the first time kissed Althea since their estrangement.

"I am so sorry," she said, "so sorry, and only wish

we could help you. But we are only in the way. We shall be at Florence to-morrow."

Sir Francis for once found the gates of his eloquence closed; he could only shake the Princess's hand sympathetically and repeat the consolatory commonplaces, which never yet comforted a human soul.

But driving up the terraced road he had much to say. It was a mad, murderous business, as stupid as wicked, of which they had not heard the last.

"Poor Althea!" said his daughter. "Poor Althea!"

The baronet was sorry for her, too, but could not forget that the Prince's opponent was his son's friend. Goodness only knew what Ronald might not have said to this excitable Frenchman, whom he was fool enough to introduce to the Princess before her marriage.

"If," he added, "our name is mentioned, it will be most unpleasant for me both in the House and out of it.

Already Sir Francis was measuring the tragedy by his personal interests.

"But will the Prince recover?" asked Sybil.

"His man says the doctors take the worst possible view of the case. They fought like wild cats."

"The poor Prince!" sighed Miss Dodd.

"It's sad enough, in all conscience. With his English education he should have known better. It's horrible, but we can't mend it; jealousy must be at the bottom of it all. Couldn't you see that the Princess guessed why they fought?"

The carriage mounted; the air grew cooler and more fragrant, the mountain larks sang in the sky, but her pleasure in the day was gone—stained as it were with blood.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

IT was seven o'clock when Althea reached the Palazzo Monteverro, and, with an aching impression of long dusty white roads behind her, glanced nervously up at the square white house. The shutters were closed against the slanting evening sun ; the wide iron gates of the square garden thrown open as on her " At Home " days ; the gravel of the circular drive was scored with wheels. For, as the news spread over Florence, as news only can spread in a city of gossip, there had been a constant stream of inquirers.

The great silver salver at the elbow of the Prince's porter, imperturbable in uniform of green and gold, was full of visiting cards. Florence, in the enjoyment of a new sensation, was stirred ; well-dressed men and women in the carriages returning from the Cascine spoke of nothing but the duel, for which a dozen contradictory causes had already been invented.

Sanchiarro met the Princess in the paved hall of

the palace, still in civilian dress and under nominal arrest by order of the military authorities. Althea, with a sinking heart, read the forboding on his face.

"How is he?" she asked.

"There is no change."

"Why did you not prevent this, Captain Sanchiarro? You are a soldier and must know how."

The reproach stung him.

"I wish I had fought in my cousin's stead. But it could not have been avoided."

"Why did they fight?"

Sanchiarro hesitated, but, remembering the Prince's injunction, evaded the question.

"It was an old scandal which matters not now. But the Prince expects you; he has been counting the hours; you will bring him what comfort remains to bring."

The dread which had whirled with her for ten leagues, through the glare, the dust, and the heat, seemed hardening around her in the gloom of the still house.

Through the door of her husband's dressing-room came the unforgettable waft of some antiseptic, a Sister of Mercy at the table was reading a pious book.

She rose at Althea's step.

"He has been asking for you, Madame the Princess. The doctors desire that he should be kept very quiet. The case is grave—most grave. We are in the hands of God."

Althea stole into the darkened bedroom. Through a shutter a long narrow shaft of light entered like a luminous spear.

The Prince lay on his back, breathing heavily, a blood-stained handkerchief beside him : on the table, by the tall white bed covered with mosquito curtains, stood a marble basin full of ice.

"It is Althea," she said softly. "My poor Nando! You must make haste and get well."

His wife's voice had never been so low and tender before. It seemed the sweetest thing in a receding world.

She knelt down and kissed his clammy forehead, whilst he held her hand between his feverish fingers, a shadow gathering on his face. His blue eyes seemed already sunken ; over him hovered the sense of an immense fatigue ; the meek, wan look, which suffering brings, had descended on his pale cheeks, and straight features. She watched him whilst the waves of pity ebbed up from her heart, which, but

for her strength of will, would have spent itself in a storm of sobs.

"I've made a pretty mess of it, haven't I?" he said, turning his languid blue eyes on her face. "I rather expected you would pitch into me. I deserve it."

"I will wait till you are well before I scold—and then beware. But you must not talk; wait till to-morrow."

"To-morrow never seemed so far off before," said the poor Prince. "I have been here a month of hours already."

The Sister approached, and, standing between the two rooms, held up a warning finger.

"Hush, Nando, hush!" said Althea, and, with her hand still clasped in his, she sat in the chair which the Sister silently brought.

At last the Prince spoke again.

"Althea, it's no use trying to dodge things."

"Dodge them till—to-morrow," she replied apprehensively.

"A man with a hole through his lungs can't bargain with time. Why haven't you asked me what we fought about?"

She laid her head on the pillow by his; his feverish breath brushed her hair and face.

"Because I guess," she whispered. "Something was said."

The Prince nodded.

"It's too horrible," she whispered again. "Don't speak of it."

"I must," said he.

He lay still, thinking, with melancholy eyes fixed on hers. In some mysterious way her beauty seemed receding into the shadows.

"Talk quietly, then," she replied.

"Yesterday I made everything as straight as I could," he resumed, in a low voice. "If I don't get over this you'll be all right. The child is yours. Bring him up as you like, but let him love dear Italy, and serve her if he can. A cosmopolite—a *sans patrie* like myself is a mistake. He must be a Catholic; otherwise he is every bit yours. The whole thing has been worked out. You understand, Althea?"

"Yes, Nando. It is you and your mother over again."

"Yes, but with a difference. My mother was a clever woman, but you're cleverer."

Another silence followed, filled up painfully by the Prince's breathing. She felt that he was collecting strength for a fatal spring at the thing haunting him, and made one effort more to stop him.



"Don't talk any more, now, Nando," she entreated. "Try to sleep. I'll stay by you here."

He shook his head. "It must be said," he answered. "I was only wondering how to say it like a gentleman. You must know there's a taint in our blood, Althea."

"A taint?"

Then he rushed at it.

"Yes. For months I have been on the rack for what happened before I knew you. My mind is like a beast browsing on poisoned herbage. All round it are sweet grasses, yet some accursed instinct drives it to the rank stuff in the noisome ditches. Do you understand, Althea?"

"Yes," she said, "it's a moral nightmare. Dismiss it. Let my love and the child's love brush it all away."

The appeal touched him deeply.

"You are very dear to me, Althea, and very good, but let me have my say out. It will be best. Suspicion has been the curse of my race. Will you tell me the truth, no matter how it hurts me?"

His voice was solemn. In dread of what was coming she answered, "Yes!"

"I should have outgrown it," he resumed, "if I had been let alone. But the thing lay in ambush at street corners, as it were, and caught me by the throat.

When I was last in London I overheard two men talking of you,"—there was a long pause—"as though Colonel Sancroft had been your lover. It nearly made me mad, but I put all the weights on the thing and kept it down. When the child was born I was well on the way to recovery. But my accursed bad luck was always waiting for me in ambush. De Bouteville repeated the same scandal at that infernal centre of gossip, the Club in the Tornabuoni. That is why we fought. I want to know whether you love this man whom I have heard you praise a thousand times."

His eyes were reading hers with a fixed, hungry glare of apprehension.

"No," said Althea, laying her face against his, "no, no! I only care for my poor sad Nando and for baby. There's nothing else in the world for me—now."

"Ah, *now*, Althea, but what of *then*? Tell me, on your honour—and I know you never lie—tell me, did you ever love this man? I must know the worst!"

"But there can be no worst," she urged. "The past can't touch us, and is quite dead."

"That is no answer. Tell me—on your honour—did you love him once?"

She felt the horror closing round her under his

piercing gaze. Then her answer came, it seemed in spite of her will—

“I did love him once.”

“And he knew it?”

“Yes.”

“Then curse him,” said the Prince, caught in a rush of jealous fury, raising himself on his elbow, “curse him. If he had loved you, too, you would never have married me.”

The devil had laid his trap. The poor Prince marched in ; it closed with a deadly snap for ever.

For a moment he sat up in bed under the eyes of his wife, but a sudden spasm of pain swept across his face, and a rush of blood followed from his parted lips. She clutched him in horror as he sank back and lay blood-stained and pale in her arms.

At the cry the Sister rushed in. They wiped the blood from his mouth and gave him brandy to revive him. But in vain.

“Save him!” cried his conscience-stricken wife. “Oh, my God!”

The Sister repeated the prayers for the dying. The Prince’s eyes opened widely ; there was a gurgle of blood in his throat, a spasm of the limbs, and his heart ceased to beat.

## CHAPTER XXXV

ONE day in the middle of June Sancroft, now a brigadier-general, was sitting on the lawn at Falcon-oke in a long chair. Patches of white cloud were sailing over the soft blue of the sky, their shadows trailing themselves over the landscape as though chasing the west wind that murmured in the tree-tops, and shook the chestnut-blossom in little showers on the fragrant turf. It was one of those days when England seems to press those of her children home from across the seas against her kindly breast in the pride of her beauty. "How good I am," she says, "and how tender. What has the world beyond my seas to show you like this?"

Of this Sancroft, with the acrid East still in his blood, felt something. How sweetly the English air smelt!

Illness humbles even the pride of ambition. It is then that vanity learns that it may be extinguished like a spark in the darkness. Enteric fever, following the long strain of an arduous campaign, had for the

moment shaken his nerve. Sickness compels the man of action to shoulder the burden of reflection.

Most strong and able men, even if they don't know it, hold some theory of life. The British Empire, its ideals and duties, represented Sancroft's. The stronger must coerce the weaker for the benefit of both; to be an instrument guiding and directing this massively organised energy was an ambition which he had admirably realised. But in the fell clutch of sickness, with death waiting to knock at the door, material convictions lose their potency, and it was when tossing on the waves of fever, sleeplessness, pain, and depression, that for the first time Sancroft had been able to stand outside the circle of life and study the motives within.

There are moments when men almost regret that they did not yield to temptation. Althea Westbrook's voice had flattered his ears through the murmuring quiet of the Indian night and the swish of the *punkah*.

The news of the fatal duel reached him when he was convalescent at Bombay. He was used to death, which to him was little more than an incident in a day's march; but this one clashed against his own life.

At first the news was as a bald statement in the

Indian newspapers. But soon rumours and wandering whispers touched on the causes of the quarrel. "Retrospective jealousy," said an Anglo-Indian correspondent, writing from Florence to a Simla paper, "on which a distinguished frontier soldier might possibly throw some light." And thus a scandal whispered in Florence blew on Sancroft in Bombay, and in his weakened health buzzed in his brain night and day.

He had resented Althea's marriage and now she was free.

The element of curiosity which springs up under the shadow of every tragedy induced him to return to England by the way of Florence, but with a purpose unconfessed. On the morning of his arrival he sent a note proposing to call on the Princess. The answer was in a writing which he recognised as that of Mrs. Dormer. The Princess regretted that she was unable to see General Sancroft, since, under the circumstances, the meeting could not fail to be painful to both.

This refusal to see him came as a shock to Sancroft's pride. He felt it was intended as a reproof; it even suggested that the rumour associating his name with the fatal duel was not groundless. Censure of any kind, save that springing from pro-

essional jealousy, which he treated with contempt, was an experience as novel as it was painful to him, and he had winced beneath it. Sancroft had never admired a woman so much as Althea ; distance and difficulty, the toil, the dust, the responsibility of the war, the tedium of sickness, the fret of nerves shaken by a prolonged strain, made a haze through which he regretfully looked back. But having marched out of Capua, was it possible to return? Would the Princess of Monteverro open the door which he had closed on Althea Westbrooke? Was it not more probable that she would exact punishment for the slight?

And so he sat in the sunshine meditating with a half-guilty conscience until, to his surprise, the Duchess of Southshire, ascending the path which led from a wicket gate opening into the lane leading to Falconoke, broke in on his musings.

Sancroft rose from his chair. The Duchess had announced her intention of lunching at Falconoke on that day ; Sir Rupert and his daughter had driven to the station to meet her.

"I am not at all sorry," said the Duchess, after Sancroft had explained his father's absence, "for the fact is I want a very serious talk with you.

Her Grace's appearance an hour before she was

expected was due to an interview with Sir Francis Dodd at Nutfield. There was something on her mind, and she was determined to liberate it without delay. She had never scolded her favourite since he was a lad, but did not shrink from the task now that he had developed into a brigadier-general at an age when some of his Sandhurst contemporaries were still commanding companies.

The Duchess took a chair, and motioned him to resume his.

"Yes," repeated her Grace, looking at him critically, "quite a serious talk."

"Indeed!" said Sancroft, sitting down in some wonder, for he was more accustomed to inflict than to suffer "serious" conversations.

"You're better," she began. "Not so thin and a healthier colour."

He passed a brown hand over his still gaunt cheeks and replied that he was nearly quite well again.

The Duchess glanced down at the turf and reflected a moment.

"You know, Gerald," she began, "both the Duke and myself are deeply interested in you."

"Since I was a lad at Eton and the Duke used to send me five-pound notes, you have both been my best friends."



"You have done splendidly," resumed the Duchess, smoothing the way for the coming wrench, "splendidly, and we are both proud of you, and it is only because I'm an old friend, with all the excuses of affection on my side, that I propose to interfere in your affairs now. You will forgive what I am going to say?"

"You have the right to say—everything."

He looked at her fixedly, with an odd expression in his eyes. She came to the point without delay.

"It was a great mistake on your part," she said, speaking slowly, "to call on the Princess of Monteverro when you passed through Florence."

"How on earth did you know?" he asked, flushing slightly, for he had concealed the visit from everyone.

"Never mind how I know. I also know that she most wisely declined to receive you."

"Althea Westbrooke and I were old friends," he replied, conscious that an exculpatory attitude suited him ill.

The Duchess raised her brows.

"That is the very reason why you should have kept away. You know the cause of the quarrel in which that unhappy Prince lost his life?"

"I heard a ridiculous rumour."

"It was true," said the Duchess, with emphasis.

"You are a fine soldier, Gerald, but as a tactician in the less respectable arts you don't shine."

"I am unconscious of having practised any," he said, unable to conceal his displeasure.

"In that case it will be the more easy to abandon them. The Prince fought that miserable duel, poor fellow! because he was retrospectively jealous of his wife. The Frenchman said things about you that were repeated to the Prince. Now do you wonder why the widow did not receive you?"

"Do you suggest that I am responsible for this—" Sancroft hesitated for a word but stumbled on "business," with some awkwardness.

"Indirectly," replied the Duchess firmly, "I do. I feel all the more concerned because I introduced Althea Westbrooke to the Prince. When he asked me whether there had been anything between you I said 'No.' For, of course, there can have been nothing. As the Duke says—to comfort me, I suppose—'The Prince was the victim of his own temperament.' Of course, other men were in love with Althea Westbrooke—that foolish Mr. Ronald Dodd, for instance; but the world with its usual good-nature decided that you were the hero of the only piece of scandal with which her name has been mixed up. But that's all ended now, and must be

forgotten. I can assure you the Princess won't look at you again! If she had a weakness she has outgrown it and paid the penalty for it. If you consult your own dignity you will keep out of her way."

"I see," said Sancroft, who was being pinched, pulled, and fretted by a number of extremely humiliating reflections, "that you have been talking over these things with that woman who was Miss Westbrooke's companion."

"Well, Mrs. Dormer is an excellent person, for whose character and understanding I have great respect. There! don't frown at me. What I'm saying is only for your good!"

"I am glad it is for my good, but your Grace's conclusions are not flattering."

"I leave flattery to the newspapers," she answered. "But there's something more I must say—if you'll let me."

Sancroft reflected a moment. The Duchess had acquired chartered rights to bully him.

"Anything else unpleasant?" he asked.

"No; on the contrary. It ought to be gratifying. It is about your neighbour, Miss Dodd. What do you think of her?"

"Why, I think she's charming."

"So do I; so does Sir Rupert; so does your sister.

You are, of course, aware that she likes you, and that when she marries Sir Francis will give her £60,000. Do you understand me, Gerald?"

"Imperfectly."

"Do you intend to be an old bachelor all your life?"

"I have not taken a vow of celibacy, your Grace."

"Don't be frivolous, but look the thing straight in the face. Falconoke will be yours. In the present state of agrarian depression the rent-roll isn't likely to increase."

"I'm afraid not."

"The place is aching for money to be spent on it, positively aching. You know where the last money came from?"

"A little friendly arrangement with our neighbour, I believe; humiliating but unavoidable."

"Don't talk to me of humiliation, Gerald, but think of the charming girl waiting for you yonder." The Duchess glanced toward Nutfield. "You made her like you, Gerald, before you—but I needn't say before what."

Sancroft pulled his moustache very gravely now.

"I think I understand," said he; "but, if you don't mind, perhaps it would be better to leave me to think it out a bit. I'm not very quick at things of this sort, and perhaps you have been going a

little fast for me. Don't say anything about our conversation to my father, please. Here they come."

The carriage appeared at the farther end of the drive.

"I promise—if you will be reasonable."

"I'll try."

"Good. I won't scold you any more.

With this the Duchess rose from her chair and went to meet Sir Rupert at his door.

"So sorry there should have been a misunderstanding, Sir Rupert," she said; "but I've had a charming chat with your son."

Miss Sancroft glanced at her brother; her impression belied the Duchess's comfortable claim.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

SANCROFT was now permitted to learn that his own family were anxious to promote the match which the Duchess of Southshire had urged on him. Since he had been at Falconoke he had seen Miss Dodd twice, once at lunch at home, once at dinner at Nutfield. On both occasions the subject of the duel had been carefully avoided, although its shadow was there. Sybil's manner, frank, cordial, and friendly, yet not entirely uncritical, told him nothing.

"She is more charming than ever," he had thought, "and if—"

But here he pulled himself up; "ifs" lead downhill. With him, he reflected, marriage might wait. But when a man is assured that the prettiest and nicest girl in the county is nourishing a romantic passion for him, unless he is a vulgarian with a pawnbroking soul he cannot fail to be touched as well as flattered.

Love begets affection as naturally as warm airs call forth April buds. Yet he could not forget nor

believe the Duchess's emphatic assurance that "the Princess wouldn't look at him again." Following the rebuff administered at Florence, he accepted it as a possible ultimatum of which her Grace had been made the willing instrument. Following this train of reflection, suddenly he discovered he disliked ambitions in a woman. Ambition should be left to men.

The evening of the Duchess's visit Sancroft and his sister sat by the wood fire in the hall talking after Sir Rupert had gone to bed. Miss Sancroft broke a long pause by asking what the Duchess had said to him before lunch, and after a moment's hesitation he had replied, "Miss Dodd."

"Perhaps," said his sister, looking up from her embroidery, "she told you what we hoped?"

"She said you and my father were fond of Miss Dodd."

"So we are. She was terribly distressed when you were ill—so sympathetic, kind, and thoughtful. She has a most affectionate disposition. My father has been devoted to her ever since she induced Sir Francis not to fly his flag."

"No doubt she's a very nice girl," said he irritably, "but England's full of nice girls."

It's one thing for a brigadier-general to be lectured by a duchess, another to submit to the ordeal from

his sister! To stop the conversation he rose from his chair, and taking up a newspaper disappeared into the library.

"One can't interfere with Gerald; things must take their course," thought Miss Sancroft, a little disappointed.

A few days after this the papers announced that the widowed Princess of Monteverro and her infant son had arrived in Curzon Street, Mayfair. Immediately, as a man of action, Sancroft discovered that he must find out what she meant. In their dealings with women few men can view their relations from the strict standpoint of sex equality and impartial justice.

For the adulated the cold shoulder is an iceberg; even brigadier-generals are human, and Sancroft's pride considered that the Princess was using it badly. The question was whether her conduct arose from pique or remorse. A woman, he argued, can't love a man one day and show him the door the next simply because she has become a widow. Althea had married the Prince from ambition; therefore her sorrow could not reasonably be regarded as beyond the range of those delicate consolations within the reach of all beautiful and distinguished women. Not unacquainted with widows in India, he had learnt to



expect in all parts of the world a prompt return to cheerfulness whenever worldly prosperity accompanies the bereavement.

The afternoon after his arrival Sancroft went to Curzon Street, and was shown into a drawing-room, where Mrs. Dormer received him.

The duenna, with the air of one who was on duty, shook hands in a business-like way, and said :

"I thought, perhaps it was better for you to see me before meeting the Princess again."

"Indeed," he replied, blind to her reasonings.

"You see," she explained, "that dreadful business has altered everything. When I heard of it I returned at once. It was partly on my advice that the Princess thought it wiser not to see you at Florence."

"As an old friend I merely wish to express my personal sympathy," said he.

"You can do that to-day," answered Mrs. Dormer ; "only before you do it is best that you should understand that there must be"—she was on the point of saying "no philandering," but said instead—"I mean that you should understand there are some things which can't be taken up on the old footing."

Sancroft felt angry.

"Am I to take this as a message from the Princess?" he asked.

"Oh no, General Sancroft, merely as the advice of a practical woman to prevent more mistakes."

Then while she was questioning him on his recent illness and improving health, and he was somewhat sullenly replying, the Princess, in deepest mourning, entered the room like a graceful black shadow. He saw her again almost with bewilderment. Could this be the beautiful dancer whose flying, luminous skirts had lately dazzled the stage? She was as beautiful as ever, but beautiful as the moon is, seen through a darkened sky. Long weeds of foreign aspect descending to the hem of her crape dress had blotted out the supreme worldly elegance, which had clung to her like an atmosphere and rescued her from the vulgarity of smartness.

She saw his astonishment and half smiled.

"This dress does change one," she said.

They shook hands, and the widow sat in an arm-chair opposite him; there was no doubt of it—every inch a widow. He hated black. Althea, "Voltigia," "Philomela," were all buried under the wave of funereal millinery; the widowed Princess of Monteverro had as if by magic sent all her other variants into the darkness, with their lightness, their laughter,

their charming pert ways, and the thousand and one associations which became not the mother of a prince and the heiress of a tragedy. With extraordinary skill the readjustment had been made, yet apparently as free from pose or affectation as mimicry in nature. Was it possible that this quiet dignified woman had once recklessly kissed him? Can Venus become Juno by the wearing of a black veil?

They sat and talked quietly of the late war and Sancroft's recent illness. He was congratulated on his promotion with a restrained sympathy which secretly exasperated him. It seemed to say, "You are my schoolgirl hero no longer. I know you now just as I know other men."

But when, by some tacit understanding, Mrs. Dormer left him alone with the Princess, Sancroft stepped on the forbidden ground from which it seemed there was a conspiracy to keep him off.

"I should like to say," he said abruptly, "that my attempt to pick up the broken threads of our old friendship at Florence was a mistake. But it was long since I had seen you, and I felt and still feel the greatest sympathy for the sorrow which has fallen on you."

The Princess met his troubled eyes without flinching.

"Did you know that you were indirectly connected with it?"

"I did not believe it possible—but a rumour did reach me."

"It was true," said the Princess.

They exchanged a strange glance.

"I deeply regret it," he said; "but the spirit of mischief is responsible—not ourselves."

"We are our own spirit of mischief," she answered. "The past punishes the future. You spoke of 'threads.' There are no longer any threads between us to be taken up."

"What has happened to make you hate me?" he asked.

"I don't hate you, General Sancroft, but even women outgrow weaknesses. I have only one duty in life now."

"The care of your son?"

"Yes."

"Is all the old ambition gone, then?"

"Yes, all gone, to be centred in the next Prince of Monteverro. But I think we have discussed a painful subject long enough, General Sancroft."

"Althea Westbrooke," he said, "has become the Princess of Monteverro, and is transformed."

"The widowed Princess," she said, with meaning

recalling with a secret shudder how often her praises of this man must have tortured her husband, vainly trying to stifle a weakness which he had not dared to admit till he stood at the gates of death. She had a code for reading the past with now.

Sancroft rose and stood erect before her a moment, looking down at her gloomy draperies. The Capua, which in the weakness of his convalescence he had remembered with longing, had become a city of mourning and repentance.

"It is all over between us, then," he said.

"I wish to heaven it had never begun," she replied.

"Good-bye," he said, extending his hand.

"Good-bye," she replied, giving her own in return.

"It is not likely we shall often meet. I shall live in Italy nearly always. I intend to become a Catholic."

He was not surprised. Nothing this strange woman could ever do would surprise him now.

"There is only one thing more I wish to say," she added, as he moved slowly towards the door. "If we meet never speak of these matters again. I have atoned for them and they must be forgotten."

"I promise," he said.

Then he stepped into the sunshine of the afternoon and walked along Piccadilly to his Club, conscious that the romance in his life was over.

A cloud seemed to have fallen on the day, as though the gloom of Althea's mourning shadowed the afternoon.

The influence his personality, name, and fame had exerted over this woman had been a source of secret joy which, till then, he had not fully realised. Her admiration had been a unit for measuring his own power. Suddenly the power of the spell was broken, and, now that he had lost that which, when possessed, he had so imperfectly valued, his pride was humbled, the perspective of his life changed.

He went to his Club and sat for several hours in a strange reverie. Twelve o'clock found him still with his eyes fixed on the wall opposite, deep in thought. But he started to his feet at last. A decision had formed itself in his mind. "Now is the time," he told himself, "now is the time."

Then, lest further reflection should weaken his resolution, he wrote Sybil Dodd asking her to be his wife.

"I will come," he said, "to-morrow for my answer."

That letter swept Sybil's heart away in an eddy of unspeakable joy and pride.

"Mother!" she cried, pale with delight, "mother!"

Lady Dodd read the few lines and then kissed her

daughter with the restrained satisfaction which she deemed the moment required.

"I always knew, mother," she cried, trembling with delight, "that he would come to me in the end. That wicked story was never true."

"True, darling?—of course it wasn't," answered the mother. "Althea Westbrooke was a good woman, and he has always been a hero."

The silver joy-bells rang in the recesses of her heart; the June day quivered with the echo of her rapture.

But when they told Ronald Dodd, he laughed cynically and said that

"Birnam wood had come to high Dunsinan hill."

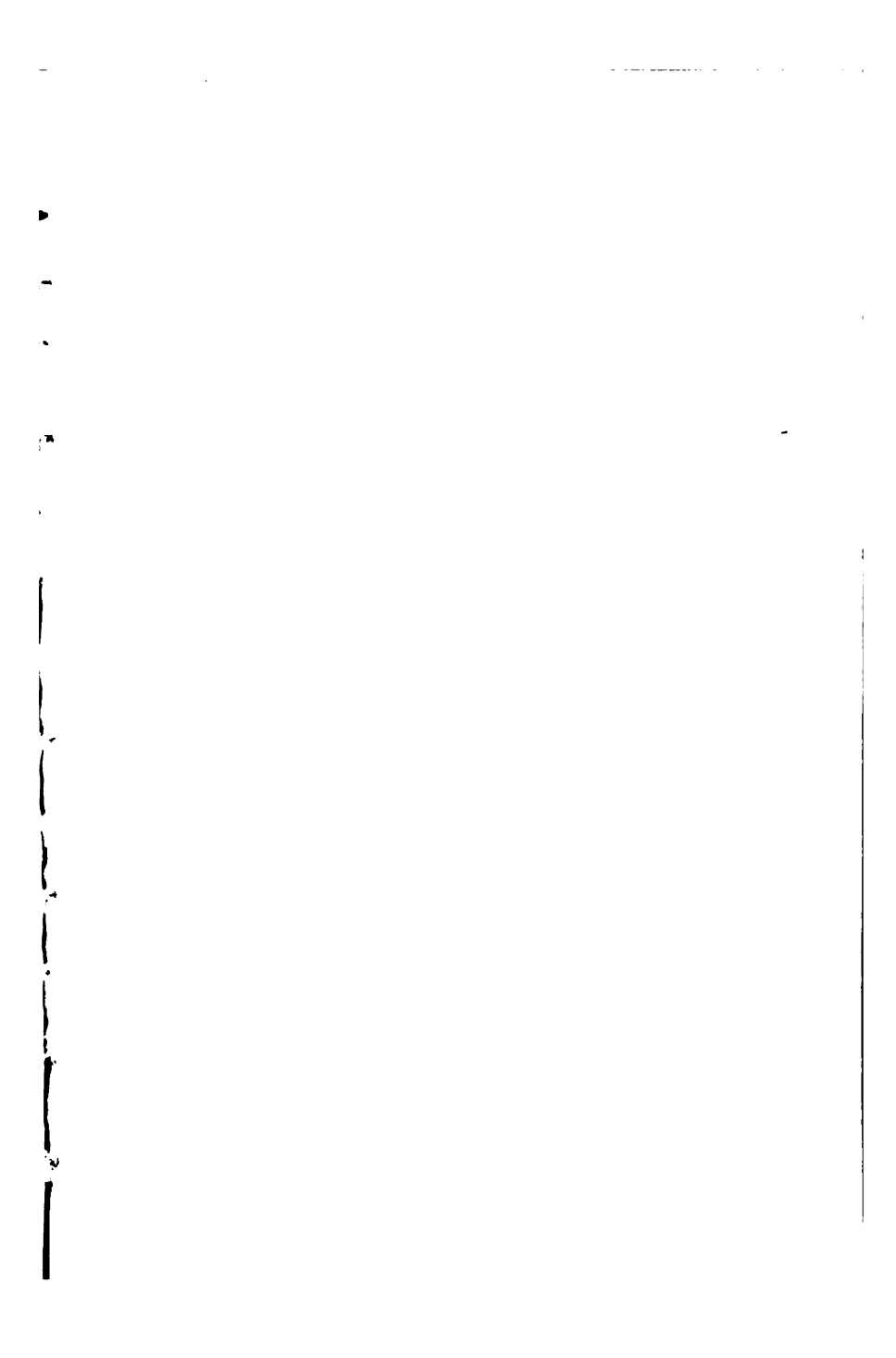
"What do you mean?" asked his father.

"Mean, sir," replied his son, "why, nothing, to be sure. I have left off dealing in allegories, and a world of orange-blossom is opening before me. Let it open. Everybody must marry somebody. If not the best, as near the best as possible, which, being interpreted, is the basis of political economy."

**THE END.**

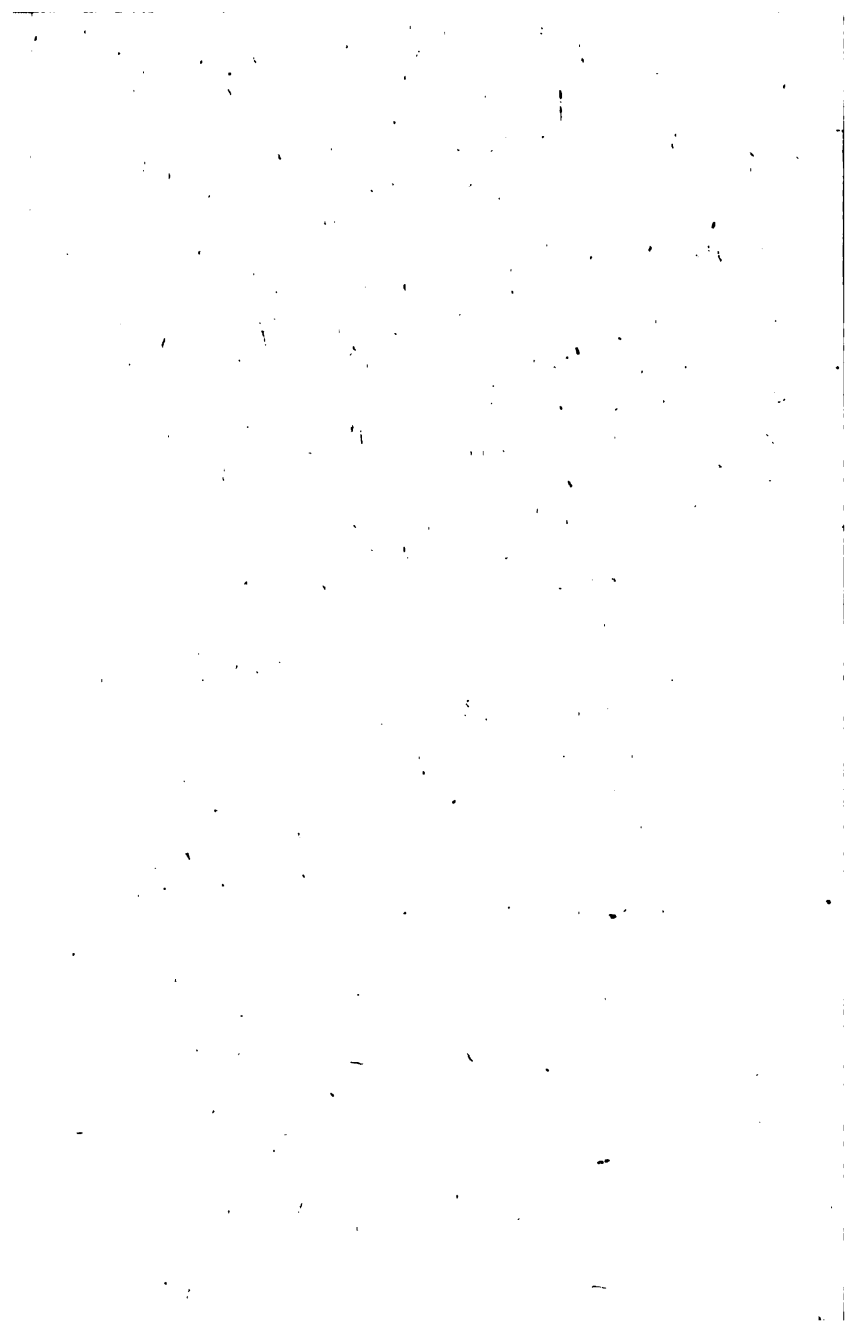
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